

“I AM the Good Shepherd”

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Palm Sunday

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¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” (John 10:11-18)

Once again, by using the words “I am” to introduce a metaphorical illustration of who he is, Jesus does three very important things. First, he makes a bold statement of his own divinity by adopting a portion of the sacred name God disclosed to Moses in the burning bush: “I Am Who I Am.” Secondly, he draws upon rich Old Testament traditions to root his messianic ministry in the ancient promises of God. And third, he brings all of this holiness near, making it accessible to ordinary people using commonplace images that evoke our earthly senses. When he says “I am the good shepherd,” Christ claims the full inheritance of a role reserved only to God, the divine keeper of the world’s sheep, but he does so in a way everyone could understand. In that day, all who heard him make this claim would have known some very real shepherds. They would know what makes a shepherd good or bad.

It is a little tougher for us, because few if any of us know any actual shepherds. Our lives are not nearly as connected to the details of the farming life. Fortunately, the gift of scripture still helps us to see, hear, and understand what it means for Christ to care for us like a shepherd, one who truly cares about the well-being of the sheep.

And there could be no better place to begin than with the 23rd Psalm. Here, in the simple but powerful poetry that Simon just read, we see the basic premise of our Good Shepherd – and that is our caretaker is **both strong and gentle**.¹ The God of heaven and earth leads with a gentle hand, letting us lie down in soft, green pastures where food is plentiful, and leading us to gentle streams, where clean water is abundant. With steadfast love and care, this shepherd satisfies our every need. At the same time, this shepherd holds a rod and a staff – a strong instrument useful for correcting, redirecting, and prodding us toward the good path... and a stick that is more than sufficient to fend off wolves in the night.

In a much more detailed way, the 34th chapter of Ezekiel builds on this vision of a strong and gentle divine shepherd, in this case by contrasting him against the ways and means of ineffective human shepherds. A bad shepherd, Ezekiel explains, is not worried about feeding the sheep. They are only concerned with feeding themselves. The bad shepherd

¹ Kent M. French, “Psalm 23: Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p. 437.



rules with harsh and cruel force, and has no interest in strengthening the weak, healing the sick, binding up the injured, or seeking out the lost. Instead of bringing the sheep safely together, the bad shepherd divides and scatters the sheep, making them vulnerable to unnecessary dangers. Thanks to selfish, cruel, and ineffective shepherds, the Lord tells Ezekiel, my sheep *“were scattered.”* *“They were scattered,”* the Lord said, *“because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals... they wandered over all the mountains... over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.”*²

Fortunately for the sheep, help was coming. God, the good shepherd, has plans to rescue his sheep and take them back from the bad shepherds. *“No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves,”* the Lord says. *“I will rescue my sheep from their mouths... I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness... I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.”*³ This mantle of God the Father as the Good Shepherd is what Christ the Son claims as his own identity, his own calling, his own destiny – One who is both strong enough and gentle enough to satisfy every need of the sheep.

From here, Christ deepens the commitment of the Good Shepherd even further. On most days, a shepherd’s job would have followed a predictable routine. We might even be tempted to say that most days, for most shepherds, would be pretty boring. Lead the sheep out; let them graze; lead them back in. But, in reality, there were threats -- thieves and predators that posed danger not just to sheep but also to the defenders of the sheep. It would not be unheard of for a shepherd to be killed in the line of duty.

In Jesus, this somewhat unlikely danger is brought to the forefront of his role as our Good Shepherd. *“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep,”* Jesus says, and this is something that an everyday shepherd probably would not do. The hired hand was not necessarily a bad shepherd, but the hired hand has limits. When push comes to shove, when danger comes near, the hired hand knows that the sheep do not belong to him. So why would he sacrifice himself? Why give his own life for the life of a lowly sheep?

But that is not an option for the Good Shepherd. *“I lay down my life for the sheep,”* Jesus says, because my love for the sheep and commitment to the sheep is complete and unyielding. But there is even more to it than that. Laying his life down for the sheep is certainly about Christ’s connection to the sheep, but it is also about Christ’s connection to God the Creator. *“I lay down my life for the sheep, [and this is the] reason the Father loves me.”* Jesus says. So laying down his life is not just a footnote or disclaimer in the job description of the Good Shepherd. Laying down his life is the goal. It is the mission. *“I have received this command from my Father,”* Jesus says, *“and I will, in full obedience, carry it out. No one will take my life from me. I will lay it down willingly, dutifully, completely, and*

² Ezekiel 34:1-6.

³ Ezekiel 34:7-16.

lovingly. But fear not, for just as I have the power to lay down my life, I also have the power to pick it up again.”

This is the underpinning of the entire gospel: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*⁴ So, for the Good Shepherd, mortal danger is not just a faint possibility; it is a cosmic certainty. The clear message to the sheep is “Do not fear. The danger is real, but the Good Shepherd will defend you at all costs, to the very end.”

Which brings us to my third and final point about what it means for Christ to be our Good Shepherd. Despite his responsibility to care for so many sheep, in so many places, the amazing thing is that the Good Shepherd knows you and loves you... knows “you” in the plural, the collective, but also knows “you” as an individual – the person you are, good and bad, in sickness and in health, as long as you – and just you – will live. *“I know my own,”* Jesus says, *“and my own know me.”*

Some of you may have been watching the nature series “The Americas.” We have, and my favorite episode so far is “The Frozen North,” which included an amazing story.⁵ Each year, the largest wildlife refuge in America, the Arctic Refuge in Alaska, is the setting for what is believed to be the longest land migration in the world. It is completed by a herd of caribou over 200,000 strong. Calves are born in the summer on the vast coastal plains, but they have very little time before they must follow the herd back to safer winter pastures. The thousand-mile trip is a long and perilous journey for newborn calves, and the hardest parts by far are the river crossings. By the time the herd arrives at these natural barriers, billions of gallons of snowmelt are pouring down out of the mountains, transforming gentle waterways into treacherous whitewater rapids. In recent years, due to global warming, these rivers are now deeper and more violent than ever. But the herd has no choice. To get to safer ground, they must cross the rivers.

The episode tells this story from the perspective of one particular mother and her young calf. As the herd enters the river, the calf is able to keep up for a while. But his legs are so short, and the current is so strong, and before long he begins to be pulled downstream at an alarming rate. Soon, he has lost all sight of the herd. Around him there is only rushing water. He bleats out for help, but there is no one to hear him.

Meanwhile, the mother caribou has reached the other side, only to realize that there is no sign of her baby. She calls out to him, but there is no answer. She lingers a while at the river’s edge, but the herd is moving on. Her maternal instincts are strong, but the primal instinct to follow the herd proves to be stronger.

Though the chances of survival are falling fast, the calf is finally able to make it to the other side of the raging river. Catching his breath on wobbly legs, he sets out alone. By some miracle, and because the herd eventually slowed down to graze, the little guy finally catches up. But now he is wandering through a crowd of caribou, possibly one hundred thousand strong, and everyone looks basically the same. He wanders to and fro, looking frantically for his mother. Given that females almost never adopt an orphaned calf, a happy ending still seems very unlikely.

⁴ John 3:16.

⁵ “The Frozen North.” The Americas: Season 1, Episode 5, executive produced by Mike Gunton, edited by Holly Spearing, BBC Studios, 2025.

The story probably would have ended badly, were it not for an amazing God-given characteristic. As it turns out, every caribou has a unique voice – a bleat that sounds to the human ear like every other bleat, but not to the caribou. The nuances of a calf's voice are written quickly and deeply into a mother's consciousness, just as a calf learns immediately to recognize the distinctive sound of its mother. And before too long, even over the din of thousands of bleating animals, she hears the cry. And when she calls out, he hears hers too, and the family is reunited once more.

As the gospel of John says, "*the sheep hear his voice.*" The Good Shepherd "*calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... They will not follow a stranger... they will run from him... [but] the sheep follow [the Good Shepherd] because they know his voice.*"⁶ And they know, with him, they will be safe.

On this Palm Sunday, we raise our own palms and our own voices to join the crowd that gathered on the Mount of Olives so many years ago to welcome the Good Shepherd into Jerusalem. In a world that knows far too many bad shepherds who seek only to serve themselves, and far too many hired hands who, when the chips are down, will cut and run, we too look to a leader, a guide, a protector, and friend whose chosen work is to seek out and save the lost... One who is strong enough but also gentle enough to do that work of seeking and saving... One who knows us by name and loves us just as we are... One who is willing to lay down his own life in the name of that love.

May God help us to know this loving voice and follow. ***Amen.***

⁶ John 10:3-5.