



Sermon for Sunday, March 27, 2022
“So, Who Needs a Shepherd?” | Fourth Sunday of Lent
Rev. Clara Thompson | Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

To be perfectly honest, there was a time early in my ministry, when if someone had invited me to participate in a “Let’s Talk About Jesus” sermon series I would have run in the opposite direction. (No offense, Charlie!) In my early years of ministry, the “Are you saved?” question was rampant. There were signs along the highways that said, “Jesus saves” and some of us were tempted to add the next sign which would read “S & H green stamps,” or today it might say, “At your favorite big box store.” A lot of good Christian people started wearing WWJD bracelets ... What Would Jesus Do? I always thought the better question would be, “What would Jesus have ME do?” I was more of a “Christ” Christian than a “Jesus” Christian because the frequent talk of “me and Jesus” got under my skin. Whether someone told me, “Me and Jesus vacuumed the living room floor this morning” or “Jesus found me the perfect parking place,” I got squeamish. Now, I do NOT mean to offend anyone, least of all any of you! I am sure that people had genuine faith in their Jesus and I hope their faith gave meaning to their lives. But me? I was more of a Christ Christian. You know, the Jesus Christ who walked a little bit above the surface of the earth. The lofty One whom I looked up to, not the one I hung out with while cleaning the house. The One who wouldn’t show me what HE would do, but would challenge me to think about what *I* could do in order to spread his love and his Word more faithfully.

Well now, the older I get, the more I need Jesus, the Jesus who gets in the muck with me. The Jesus who leads me not to a good parking place but beside the still waters and in right paths. The Jesus who guides me and walks with me not while I’m vacuuming the floor necessarily, but through the darkest of valleys. The Jesus who feeds me at a table where everyone is welcome. The Jesus who protects me, shelters me, keeps me safe in his love no matter the storms of life that blow

mightily around me and within me. The Jesus I need is the Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, who is willing to risk his life for me, and for you, and for all. The Jesus who invites me, and who then calls me to take some risks for others.

The people of Jesus' day would have easily understood the image of Jesus as a shepherd, a good shepherd, who took good care of his sheep. They would readily picture the hired help running from the wolf, leaving the sheep for the wolf's plentiful feast. Images of sheep are plentiful in the Bible. There are over 500 references to sheep in our Scriptures, if you include allusions to lambs and rams. Sheep provided food to eat, milk to drink, wool for the weaving of cloth, and even some rough clothing and covering for tents. Sheep were used as a method of exchange – you could trade some sheep for something else you needed. And sheep were used pretty extensively within the sacrificial system; they were used for burnt offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings, and peace offerings. So the people who were with Jesus when he said, "I am the good shepherd" understood right away the importance of having a good shepherd to tend the sheep. For good shepherds provide safety and security for the sheep. The sheep hear the shepherd's voice and recognize it. They know that the shepherd can be trusted to lead them to safety and to take care of them. The shepherd's role is to lead, guide, feed, protect, and seek lost sheep. Jesus is saying that's exactly what he'll do for us. And in this sermon series on "Let's Talk About Jesus" as we study and learn from Jesus' various "I am" statements in the Gospel of John, this is the only "I am" statement where Jesus is portrayed as a person ... a shepherd, a good shepherd, someone who takes good care of his sheep, of his flock, of us.

Let's look a little more closely at a couple of the verses in this morning's Gospel reading as we think about that question, "What would Jesus have ME do?" Jesus says, "I lay down my life for the sheep" (verse 15)... "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again." (verse 17). Now, I'm guessing that most of us are not too keen on the idea of laying down our own life for the sake of someone else unless we absolutely have to. I don't know about you, but I don't wake up every morning and say to myself, "Golly gee-willickers, I hope I can lay down my life for someone today." The good news is that a number of scholars believe that a clearer translation from the Greek words would be "to risk one's life" instead of "to lay down one's life." Eugene Peterson in *The Message* suggests "sacrifices himself" rather than "lay down one's life" in verse 11. From *The Message*, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary." Again in verse 15 Jesus says, "I put the

sheep before myself, sacrificing myself if necessary.” The other piece of good news is that Jesus is speaking of himself. This is the “What Would Jesus Do?” question. But I am suggesting the better question is “What would Jesus have ME do?” What I learn from this passage is that I need to be willing to take some risks for others, to put myself out there for others, to be willing to move beyond my comfort zone for the sake of others. That’s the kind of sacrificial living I think we are called to make.

Karen-Marie Yust, Professor of Christian Education at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA, suggests that we can move toward this sacrificial living by practicing what she calls “extravagant hospitality.” Practice extravagant hospitality in our daily lives so that it becomes second nature, and so we are ready if and when a greater sacrifice is required. Let’s face it, few of us will be called upon to make huge sacrifices for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of Jesus. But if we can train ourselves to be attentive to what is happening around us ... watching with eyes of compassion, listening with not only our ears but with our hearts, we will begin to discover the small sacrifices we can make which will help someone else. When we see someone holding a cardboard sign asking for help on the corner of Whitney Way and Odana Road, we can offer a genuine smile and say, “Good morning!” even if we choose not to give them anything beyond our acknowledgement that this person, too, is a child of God. Rather than just writing a check to help feed the hungry (though that is important too!) we can become a regular volunteer at a free meal site, not only dishing the mashed potatoes onto the plate, but looking at the person on the other side of the food line in the eyes and asking, “How was your day?” and then listening for their answer. Professor Yust writes, “Wherever Christians encounter persons who make them uncomfortable, there is an opportunity to engage in forms of hospitality that help believers practice choosing the role of good shepherds.” (Feasting on the Gospels, John, Volume 2, p. 18) I would suggest that this is precisely what moves us from the question: “What Would Jesus Do?” to the question: “What Would Jesus Have ME Do?” And with enough practice, we’ll not only be ready for a little bit sacrifice, we’ll be eager for it. For the Good Shepherd will have taught us to be good shepherds too.

During Lent you have been learning more about Jesus’ “I am” statements in the Gospel of John. The other “I am” images and metaphors of bread, light, and vine, can inform our understanding of Jesus, but it is the Good Shepherd who invites and draws us into a personal relationship in a different way. Over these past several weeks as I have listened to your worship services online, I have come to realize for myself that the BREAD can sustain me, but it cannot hold me. The LIGHT can

illumine my understanding of God and God's world, but it doesn't necessarily teach me to be a light myself. The vine can connect me, but it cannot hear my bleating. I need a relationship, a personal relationship, with someone with their feet on the ground, someone who will lead, guide, feed, and protect me, and who will seek me out each and every time I get lost. I need Jesus, the Good Shepherd. So, who needs a shepherd? I do. Don't you?

Amen.