***“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”***

 Throughout the Gospel of John, the gospel writer was attempting to paint a portrait of who Jesus was using metaphoric images in a series of “I AM” statements, such as I AM the ***“Son of Man”, “Bread of life”, “Light of the world”, “Gate for the sheep”, the “Good Shepherd”, the “Resurrection and the Life”, “the Way, the Truth and the Life”, and the “True Vine”.***  Each of these offered a small glimpse of who Jesus was and affirmed the overall message that Jesus is indeed the multi-faceted Messiah to all of God’s people.

 In the passage that came right before our lectionary text this morning, Jesus was described as the ***“Good Shepherd”***[[1]](#footnote-1) and the ***“Gate for the sheep”***[[2]](#footnote-2) keeping in line with the theme that we talked about last week when the risen Christ appeared before the disciples and reminded them of their calling when they said “yes” to God to ***“Tend My Lamb”*** and to ***“Feed My Sheep***”.

The image of the sheep and the shepherd may be somewhat difficult for many of us to grasp or relate to, especially those of us (myself included) who have never been to a farm or even come near a sheep in my entire life. The closest might be to a petty zoo and that’s about it. What do we know about being sheep and being a shepherd? Not much!

Perhaps we may be able to imagine the image of the shepherd and the sheep with those who are “leaders” and those who are followers. The shepherd not only has the responsibility to lead but also the responsibility to guide and protect those who are under his/her leadership. The shepherd must be willing lay down himself for the sake of the welfare of the rest of the sheep under his care.

Last week we read about how, right after Jesus was gone, one of the self-proclaimed leaders among the disciples (Simon Peter) declared that he was going to go back to fishing. We notice the kind of influence Peter had among his fellow disciples, whatever Peter said, the others would follow. But does that make him a good leader then? Maybe, maybe not. Perhaps he was just bossing people around and being persuasive of others. But did that classify him to be a good leader though?

 Our passage today tells us that a good shepherd would lead by compassion and love, for the sake of those under his care. He would name his sheep and call them by their names. This is a rather personal touch, when someone calls you out by your name…not just your first name, but your full name, including your middle name or any other names that we may have based on our culture, if you have one. **When someone calls you out by your name, it instantly connects the caller and the ones who are being called in a much deeper and personal level.** That’s the kind of relationship that is being established between the shepherd and the sheep and likewise between God and humanity.

The shepherd leads and the sheep follow. The shepherd keeps watch over the sheep and prevents them from falling into harm’s way. In turn, the sheep listen attentively to the voice of the Shepherd. Like a parent and a child, both the sheep and the shepherd know each other and trust each other through this special bonded relationship.

 In the passage that we read earlier, Jesus reminded us that no matter what life brings along or what trials that we might face, we are never too far away from the voice of the Great Shepherd, who keeps watch over us. The Shepherd understands his sheep’s needs and the sheep trusted Him and recognized His voice (and His voice only).

 Furthermore as we read in Psalm 23, **in light of who God is as the Great Shepherd, we come to discover who we are as God’s sheep.** The focus that I would like for us to meditate on this morning is this,

***“What does it mean for Jesus to be the Great Shepherd in our lives? How have we unconditionally surrendered ourselves to the leading of the Shepherd?***

***How do we recognize the Shepherd’s voice in the midst of many competing voices in our world today?”***

These are all valid questions that we must ask of ourselves.

 Even at times when our relationship with God may fizzle, God remains steadfast in faithfulness to the end.

The Great Shepherd still takes us back even when we’ve wandered off on our own or have gone astray. How many times have we done that? The Shepherd knows where we are and will go out of his way to seek us through grace and reconciliation. He will bring us back to the sheep pen under this care and nurture us under His wings. The shepherd loves us and embraces us especially during times of despair and seemingly hopeless situations.

 Earlier this week, I received an email from a friend of mine whom we belong together in a fellow minister’s support group. She shared with us that her 30 year-old daughter has tragically lost her battle with cancer to the brain. All of us were deeply saddened by the tragic loss. We had thought that her daughter was receiving the proper medical treatment and care and that she was on the road to recovery. Unfortunately something went tragically wrong in the past couple of weeks, my friend’s daughter’s condition rapidly deteriorated and the doctor’s prognosis was NOT optimistic at all. She was placed in hospice care earlier this week under heavy sedation. But the grace of God, she only stayed in hospice care for a few hours before she entered into eternal life with God.

Both my friend and her husband were not prepared to say “good-bye” to their daughter just yet. They would have to have her for a few more months. It was never easy to lose someone whom you love so dearly, especially your own child. In the midst of all of this, my friend shared with us her source of strength, peace, and comfort through Psalm 23.

***The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.***

 ***2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;***

***he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul.***

***He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.***

***4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;***

***for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.***

 ***5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;***

***you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.***

 ***6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.***

In the midst of deep tragedy and sorrow, we yearn for words of comfort, reassurance and consolation, in order to fill the empty voids of our hearts, and Psalm 23 offers us just that!

Like the parable that Jesus taught, it is never easy for the shepherd to lose one of his own sheep, even if he has 99 others more. The shepherd would still be willing to risk his own life in search for that one lost sheep or the one that is losing her battle in this life. The Father knows how painful it must be for us to endure such agony and pain because God himself also lost His own beloved child…He too was gone too soon (only 33) and had to endure through such tragic and untimely death. But this was all part of God’s timely plan for humanity.

 Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child or a Shepherd who will not give up in search for the lost sheep, God will never abandon God’s people in the midst tragedy and sorrow. The Great Shepherd will continue to tend and feed His sheep, as we are commanded to do likewise to other sheep. The Holy Spirit will continue to pray and intercede for us and heal us from our broken hearts, griefs, and despairs. No matter what our future may hold, God’s hand remains firmly in control, holding us and embracing us. Nothing and no one can snatch us away! For nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 May we seek the true voice of the Shepherd and be attentive to the vision that the Great Shepherd has set before us in the light of hope and peace in this world. May we be inspired to share God’s love through mutual encouragement and strength, so that together, we may overcome the forces of evils and darkness of this world.

 Friends, the Great Shepherd has called us with His own voice and has given us the peace that surpasses all understanding***.***  ***“My sheep hear my voice.”*** He said, ***“I know them, and they follow me.”[[4]](#footnote-4)***Christ has promised to remain with us as the good shepherd even to the end of time, so that in life and in death we may be confident that we belong - NOT to the powers of evil, sin, and death, but to him of whom we can declare with confidence and trust: ***“The Lord is my Shepherd.”***[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *John 10:11* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *John 10:7* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Romans 8:39* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *John 10:27* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Roger, John B. *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2,* P.436 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)