

“The Good Shepherd”

Living as Light in a Dark World – part 3

John 10:1-21

Welcome, prayer.

For the last several weeks, we have been looking at Jesus’s famous “I am” statements, using them to help us shine light into a dark world. In John 8:12, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” With Jesus’s love and light in us, we can illuminate the way to God for others. Last week, my lovely wife preached on Jesus’s second statement, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Being Jesus’s disciples means we must seek the way to God, seek the truth, and live our lives for him. When we all do this, we make the world a better place.

Today we look at Jesus’s catch phrase, “I am the Good Shepherd.” (John 10:11) Most of us aren’t raising sheep, so we may wonder, what does shepherding have to do with Jesus and us? Or was he talking about dogs? Turns out, if you do a Google image search for “Good Shepherd,” you get lots of pictures of German shepherd puppies. Today’s sermon is not about puppies. Sorry.

Shepherding is actually about leadership. If you’ve ever watched an old sci-fi movie, tell me: What do the little green aliens say after they land? “Take us to your leader.” Imagine for a moment that this actually happened to you. To whom would you take them? The scary thing is (besides little green aliens), we might be hard pressed to figure out a good leader to take them to!

The problem in our world is, we need effective leadership. Our national leadership was prominently displayed on Wednesday. Honestly, I couldn’t help but reflect on how all the different messages at the inauguration sounded very much like sermons to me. The poetry, songs, and prayers gave the setting a nearly church-like atmosphere. I had to constantly remind myself, I was not watching a religious event, but a political one. The purpose of that event, however, was not unlike what we are about today: we all are looking for someone to lead us, and we are taking leaders’ words very seriously.

Two needs overlap my world right now: the need for leadership in our country, and my own need to be a better leader. Each of us has the ability to influence others. Some are given bigger platforms than others, but everyone has

some audience listening and watching them. Thank goodness I’m not preaching this live on YouTube....oh, wait, I am!

We can all work to improve our leadership skills. The real question is, whom are we following? Whose leadership do we want to emulate?

Good leadership inspires people to give their time, energy, resources, and even lives to a greater cause than themselves. Here is a leadership quote I read the other day: “The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mature man wants to live humbly for one.” (Catcher in the Rye, J.D. Salinger, 188.)

Wouldn’t it be great if the leadership we followed inspired us to live for humble causes? Great causes? The greatest leaders bring out the best in ourselves and unite us in a common cause. Have we ever found a perfect leader who will do that for us?

(Spoiler alert: about one out of three questions I ask, the answer usually is, “Jesus.”) So, whom do you think we should lift up as our one true leader? That’s right. Christ.

The Bible clearly lifts up Jesus as the example of perfect leadership. If we are going to find a way to help our world filled with so many false leaders, we need to understand how and why we should follow Jesus Christ.

Jesus actually makes two “I am” statements in this passage. Two metaphors. I like a good metaphor, or five! Jesus says, “I am the gate (or door),” and “I am the good shepherd.” Each image gives us a reason to follow Jesus.

By saying, “I am the door,” Jesus is proclaiming that he is the way to eternal salvation, to real life. Recall that this conversation is taking place between Jesus and the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders who are struggling to comprehend who Jesus really is. As I said last time, those in positions of power are rarely able to acknowledge Jesus as their Lord, because they have so much to lose. They don’t want to follow Jesus anywhere. To them, Jesus is a wall, not a door. They are content with their own leadership, however flawed and corrupt it is. Look, their high priest and others conspired, successfully, to have Jesus killed. These Pharisees were not looking for a new leader. Yet, I think this passage is seeking

to transcend that singular day when Jesus taught in the temple and reach out to all generations saying, “This is why you should choose to follow Christ.”

Jesus starts his speech with this statement: “I tell you the truth.” (John 10:1) That’s a critical value right there. Good leadership values integrity. Jesus not only speaks the truth, as we learned last week, he is the truth. To help them understand, Jesus contrasts himself with robbers and thieves.

Leadership is all about trust. The sheep and guard don’t listen to the thieves. Jesus points out that the sheep trust only the shepherd. They only listen to his voice. The guard trusts the shepherd alone and opens the door. If you remember nothing else this morning, remember this: Jesus can be trusted. Always.

When Jesus says, “I am the gate,” he proclaims the way to abundant life. The thieves and bandits are really anybody who steals your joy. Personally, I always think of the devil when I read that line. The devil wants to steal your joy and incapacitate you with fear, anger and depression. He wants to destroy your soul. However, Jesus wants to fill you with life.

It seems that the listeners aren’t tracking Jesus, so he turns to the other metaphor. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11) Jesus goes above and beyond the call of duty; he goes out of his way to call us. Even though I have some great friends, I don’t seriously think any of them would ever die for me. Yet Jesus freely gives up his life for us. He really is the only one who can, because he is the Son of God. Jesus ultimately shows us perfect, humble leadership, because he literally dies for his cause: to save us.

This is where the shepherd analogy for good leadership really makes sense to me. Jesus is the perfect leader. He stands and fights for us. Jesus says in verses 12-13, “The 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.” False leaders are exposed when they encounter trouble – they “run from the wolves and abandon the sheep.”

Have you ever encountered a leader like that? Someone who would abandon you when the going got tough? I had some mentors and teachers when I was younger whom I admired greatly, yet they fell into compromise and moral failure. I don't judge them. I just have the sad feeling that despite all I learned from them, I cannot follow their leadership example. Look, we are all broken, I know. I disappoint people, too. But, somehow, I know Jesus will never disappoint me. Never. Jesus would never compromise. Jesus would never give up. That's the leadership I long for.

Jesus is the door. He is the good shepherd. But that doesn't mean everyone follows him. We all have a choice to make this morning. How will you respond to God?

Jesus clearly says he wants all of us to be one flock, his flock. What does any team need, even more than talent? Unity. Togetherness. President Biden called for unity in his inaugural address on Wednesday. I try to remember every Sunday to say, “We need each other; we can't be the church alone.” But here on earth, no president or pastor can provide the type of unity that Jesus offers. Christ is our shepherd. Only he can truly unite us. Only he can help us rise above our selfishness. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” (Psalm 23:1) They only thing we should crave is the love of Jesus, which he lavishes on us.

For me, the most important part of Jesus's speech was this: the sheep know the good shepherd, because they know his voice. In the Bible, “to know someone” means to know them intimately. In Matthew 7:23, Jesus rebukes people who claimed, falsely, that they were his disciples. Why? He says, “I never knew you.” Real, biblical intimacy that goes far beyond physical attraction. To know someone in this sense is to know them the way you know your best friend – not only their voice, but also their favorite food, song, pastime, and place to get away. This type of knowing is the same way a parent says to a child, “I knew you were going to do that.”

Let me ask you plainly: Do you know God? Do you know the shepherd? Do you recognize his voice? What does Jesus' voice sound like to you? What do you hear him saying? He is willing to lay down his life for you. Do you know any

leaders in your life that would say that? Did you know that you're worth dying for?

Psalm 23:1 says, "The Lord is my shepherd." All I can tell you is that I trust Jesus because he not only died for me, he intercedes for me at God's throne. Jesus goes to his heavenly Father and says, "Eric is my sheep. I love him. I will protect him." I really try to listen to his voice. I utilize the gifts Christ has given me: Bible study, fellowship, worship, giving, discipleship, quiet time. If there is one thing this pandemic has given me, it's plenty of quiet time! And when I listen, I do my best to obey, following the Holy Spirit as he speaks to my conscience.

How do your leaders make a play for your heart? Whom do you follow? We live in a society saturated with media and commercials. People are trying desperately to win your loyalty, so they can have exclusive access to your mind, heart, and wallet. Sometimes we just need a better filter, a voice that says, "Is this thing really the best for you, your family, your community, and your world?" I think if we took even just one element of Jesus's leadership and contrasted it to the messages bombarding us, we'd find ourselves in a much better position to judge what is best for ourselves. Our families, schools, workplaces, and yes, even our government, would be much better off if we just asked, "Is this really the way to the abundant life that God wants for all of us?" A little reflection, a little time to stop and listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd would be great for all of us.

Maybe you already know the Shepherd and you do follow him. If so, how badly do you want others to follow him? Just a thought: What if we spent as much energy and resources on getting people to know Jesus as we do on elections in our country? How much different would the world be?

We need good leadership. We need to encourage each other to be strong leaders. And we need a leader who can truly unify us, someone who knows us better than we know ourselves. Someone who knows our very thoughts, who knows what makes our hearts beat, who knows the words we long to hear: "You are forgiven. You are loved. You were created for abundant life. You don't have to be lost any more. 'Come to me, all you who labor, and I will give you rest.'" (Matthew 11:28)

You know who says those words to you? Jesus, the Gate to Eternal Life, the Good Shepherd. Will you listen and follow him? I certainly hope so.

Memory Verse: John 10:10 (NIV)

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Reflection Questions:

1. Who or what has guided you through life so far? (A certain book, a teacher, a faith leader, a parent, etc.)
2. How are people a little like sheep in their response to anxiety?
3. What does Jesus' voice sound like to you? What does it say?
4. How can you tell the difference between a "thief and bandit" and "the good shepherd"?
5. Think of someone you know who seems lost. How can you introduce them to the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ?