

## John 10:1-10 “Everything Sheep”

May 7, 2017

My wife is into sheep. Well, not exactly sheep, she loves to knit, so she's into wool. Well, not exactly wool, untreated wool shrinks when you wash it so she uses Superwash, a treated wool that doesn't shrink. And she dyes her own colours, mostly Kool-Aid colours like cherry, or tropical punch or grape, or Jell-O colours like lime and blue. She even blends them to make multi-coloured wool. But real wool is expensive, so she goes to Value Village and buys odd lot bags of ... not wool. My wife is into sheep. She shops for sheep yogurt. She paints sheep pictures. She watches videos and podcasts about sheep. She tried to teach me about all things sheep. When we're driving in the country, we stop and take pictures of sheep. She dreams of having her own flock and wonders how many we have room for at the cottage when we retire. Her heart is set on wool sheep so she can shear and card and spin and dye and knit with their wool. I dream of lamb chops and souvlaki.

But here's the question that I want to start with today. Why does Scripture make so much use of sheep, and shepherds? The Bible seems overrun with sheep. A plague of sheep. Sheep are mentioned in the Bible more than 500 times, more than any other animal. Abel had some. Abraham did. Isaac did. Jacob and his sons did. Moses spent some time as a shepherd. David did too. Their prominence in Scripture grows out of two realities. Sheep were important to the nomads and agricultural life of the Old Testament peoples. In dry and semi-dry climates people had to be able to pick up and move to follow the grazing areas. So they lived in tents and they herded goats and sheep. Sheep are also used throughout the Bible to refer to God's people.

What do you know about sheep? Sheep don't survive well by themselves. If they get lost, they perish. They are susceptible to predators and are easy prey. They are easy victims of the elements. They can even be overcome by their own wool. Sheila the sheep had escaped from her home and was lost for six years. When she was found, she was not able to stand up because her fleece was so heavy. Her trimmed off fleece weighed almost fifty pounds. Sheep need a shepherd. It's the nature of the animal. They need to be fed, and led, and protected.

So, our text today gives us an important picture of Jesus. He is the Shepherd, the Good Shepherd. He looks for the lost and cares about even one going astray. He leads them and cares for them. He calls them by name. He claims to be the one who provides abundant life. Think about some of the pictures that the Bible gives us. The shepherd searching for the lost sheep, rejoicing when the lost is found, carrying it triumphantly home on His shoulders. The most favoured, Psalm 23, the LORD, Yahweh, is my Shepherd. The great I am, the one who is and was and ever shall be. Ezekiel tells us that the day will come when “God himself will be shepherd for His sheep.” When he wrote that, God's people were at one of their lowest points. Their unfaithfulness and sin had led them away from God. Many of them were in exile in Babylon. Their country was overrun by their enemies. Jerusalem had become a dusty heap of ruins. The few people left in Israel lived in poverty and misery. Here's the picture of God, their shepherd, that gave them hope and promise.

Ezekiel 34:11-16 ... *“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares 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...”*

Can you, for a moment, feel what God's Old Testament people felt? Have you ever felt so lost and alone? Discouragements and setbacks in our lives can hit us very hard. Family problems tear at our hearts. Health problems, work problems, financial problems that you can't get out from under. You end up with this unshakable feeling of lostness and hopelessness. You turn on the TV and all that's on is the news. How am I supposed to feel when the world is filled with strife and tension, war and threats of war? Hearts fill with anxiety, often fearing the worst, while trying to hope for the best. In whom do you trust? Leaders, kings, and princes, or in the Lord, the Good Shepherd, who holds us in His hands, who sends His angels to protect, who lovingly calls us home at the time of His choosing?

Jesus our Shepherd wants to give us hope and peace in uncertain times. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, cares for you. It is a message for you, but not just for you. It is also a message of hope for a lost and sin-sick world. Think about it, in the midst of an uncertain world, you know the Good Shepherd. You have been gifted with peace of heart and a calm spirit. What about those people who don't have it? No peace, no calm, no shepherd. They need Jesus too. Jesus says, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen, I must bring them in also."

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who pleads for the sheep. On Maundy Thursday Jesus met with His twelve sheep and warned them that they were all about to abandon Him. Peter objected, "It may be possible for the others, but not for this sheep." Jesus predicted Peter's triple denial, then said, "I have prayed for you that your faith might not fail." So great is the love in the heart of our Good Shepherd that He weeps over Jerusalem. He sees the people there like lost sheep, wounded and bleeding. Our pleading shepherd still does that for us today. He hurts for our hurts. He grieves for our sins and the troubles we get ourselves into by our own stupidity and sinfulness. He hurts when life in an uncertain world troubles our spirit. But not only does He hurt with us, He brings our needs to the Father in prayers that we don't know how to say. The Father in heaven hears and answers and sends His help speedily.

He is the Good Shepherd who feeds His sheep. As His sheep we need spiritual and physical food. He provides the help and strength we need each day. A little girl was facing surgery for the first time and she was afraid. Her Sunday School teacher had come to see her. Afterward, she seemed much more relaxed, much to the surprise and relief of the doctor. After the operation, the doctor had to ask the teacher what he had said to the little girl because it had made such a difference. I told her about my five finger message: "The Lord is my Shepherd." One finger for each word. I told her that when I'm afraid, I remember that I am never alone, that Jesus is my shepherd and He is always with me. That explains a lot, the doctor responded. All the way to the operating room, she kept holding these two fingers and quietly whispering, "My shepherd."

He is the Good Shepherd who leads His sheep. Peter says that when things are rough, we shouldn't focus on the world around us, but we should look to Jesus. For the people that Peter was writing to, things weren't going very well. They were having a hard time and getting discouraged, so Peter has some advice for them: "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps." When He suffered on the cross for us, Jesus looked to His Father in heaven and trusted Him. When we go through bad times, we can follow His example. We can look to our gracious God and trust in what He has done for us. He came to our world with the Good News that God loves us. He died on the cross to take away the sin of the world. He rose from the dead, victorious over sin. He loved us so much that He has already run the race for us. We don't have to stumble along on our own. He picks us up, puts us on His shoulders and carries us, not just through the bad times, but through all the days of our lives. You don't have to try and find the strength in yourself. Look outside to the one who is our rock and fortress.

Most important, He is the Good Shepherd who bleeds for His sheep. He knew that the only way He could save His sheep was to die for them. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. He knew His sacrifice would be necessary because "All we like sheep have gone astray..." He gave His life and shed His blood to cleanse us from sin. By His blood we are saved. By His wounds we are healed. Praise God that He is our bleeding shepherd, and that by His blood on the cross we have forgiveness. Christ Jesus, our bleeding shepherd, our pleading shepherd, our feeding shepherd, and our leading shepherd, constantly enables us to confess that He is the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down His life for the sheep. As He calls us into His flock He gives us forgiveness and new life, and He gives us the joy and privilege of sharing the good news with others who are lost.

Many people today are looking for treasure too, the kind of treasure that Jesus alludes to in the Gospel today, the search for the abundant life. "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." So what does full life consist in? It depends who you ask. Be hip, stay young, keep fit, be in style, be current, drive a convertible. Try this: count how many sports cars you see driven by old bald guys and not young blondes. Full life comes with me in the center of the universe, self-absorbed, self-centered, self-seeking. My rights are most important. The unborn have no rights and can be aborted and tossed in the garbage. We should just let the old and sick die when they infringe on my time.

Full life comes when I get to hear what I want to hear. I want to feel good; lie to me. We want Jesus to bring us full life. But the life we are seeking often isn't real life but a counterfeit. We want Him to tell us how to have a perfect marriage and family, how to be an expert parent, how to manage our wealth and blessings, and people get this picture of the Christian life as one with no hurts, no problems, no difficulties, no challenges. Times haven't really changed. In Jesus' day, the people wanted a Messiah who would give them an abundant life, free from the Romans and their taxes and oppression. All those efforts to remain young will finally fail. All efforts to avoid death will finally fail. If you want to find abundant life, you have to come to the cross. To have life, you have to face death. To have life, you have to face the reality of death and the reality of sin. To have life, you have to step beyond death. You have to listen to the voice of the Shepherd.

Psalm 23 pictures that abundant life. It has valleys and dark places but it has abundance. It has comfort amid the valleys and dark places. It has an eternal hope. If you are looking for the treasure, the cross marks the spot. If you are looking for treasure, you have to listen to the Shepherd. Many don't like what He has to say. People prefer darkness to light. In Acts 8, Stephen's audience covered their ears. Scripture says that the day will come when people will not tolerate the truth, but trade it for a lie. Has that day come? They will get preachers who will tell them only what their itching ears want to hear.

If you are looking for treasure, you have to follow the shepherd to the cross, to forgiveness and life. "Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life." Peter spoke those words in the midst of a time when many of Jesus' disciples stopped following Him because they didn't like what they were hearing. It was that same conviction that brought Peter back to Jesus after he had denied Jesus three times. Peter knew in his heart that there was only one place he could go with his sin and guilt ... back to the cross. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls us back to the cross and back to the empty tomb. He speaks to us in His Word and feeds us at His banquet table. He gives to us abundant life, forever.