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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, April 22, 2018
Fourth Sunday of Easter/Year B
Primary Text: John 10:11-18
Sermon Title: “The Good Shepherd”

Theme

In language that recalls the twenty-third psalm, Jesus describes himself as the shepherd who cares for his sheep. He is willing to die for them, and he is able to overcome death for them.

Text

¹¹I 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."

Sermon

Today's gospel reading departs from the recent joy we have been experiencing with resurrection accounts and now we are in the 10th chapter of John's gospel. That's right about in the middle. So contextually, Jesus is back in the middle of his public ministry.

The context for this particular passage is that Jesus has already upset the Pharisees by the time this conversation takes place, and in just a few more verses the Jews will consider stoning him. And what got the Pharisees so mad you ask? Well Jesus had given sight to that poor man who had been born blind. You remember, then the Pharisees interrogated the man like he was guilty of a crime, and interrogated his parents too. And when they demanded to know who would do such a thing, the formerly blind man said Jesus the prophet had done it. Well that infuriated them and so they sought out Jesus and when they found him he told them,

³⁹Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" ⁴¹Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Our gospel reading for today follows. I would like to make sense of that ending to chapter nine that I just read to you and the passage for today, because as I see it, they are linked.

This particular passage is part of what scholars call "the Shepherd discourse," because, as you heard, Jesus made reference to sheep and shepherding several times. And while we non-sheep shepherding folks have come to love this image of Jesus, in Jesus' day, the reference was met with some controversy, even though it has biblically historic precedent. And it is equally troubling for us today – more on that as we go in.

Jesus began this passage by clarifying that he is "the good shepherd."

(καλοζ, *kalos*) "good; model; true"

But Jesus is more than merely the *good* shepherd. The word that is translated for us as “good” is the Greek word (καλός, *kalos*) which also means “model” or “true”. So it might be more appropriate for us to understand Jesus to say that he is the *model* of what shepherding is. And also that he is the *true* shepherd. There may be other shepherds but he is the one true shepherd. All others are stand-ins, posers, fakers, the evil one – but Jesus is true shepherd.

Shepherds are, of course responsible for the health and well-being of the flock. And while being shepherded is not an affront to the sheep – they are after all, pretty simple animals – Jesus is not talking about shepherding sheep. He’s talking about shepherding God’s human creation, people. And just to be clear, he isn’t speaking of the Jews or Middle-easterners, he’s talking about all people created in the image of God.

Going back to the passage that concludes chapter nine now, part of Jesus’ shepherding people requires that people recognize the *need* to be shepherded and have a *willingness* to be shepherded. And this is where the Pharisees had trouble, and I dare say, most of us too. Again to that dialogue,

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Through Jesus Christ of scripture and his Holy Spirit we get judged all the time. We call it remorse or repentance or sorrow for having done something, but make no mistake about it, it is Jesus Christ of scripture and his Holy Spirit that has set our mind in that orientation so that we can repent and ask for forgiveness.

Most of the time, when people sin it’s not some big ugly sin like we robbed a bank – I hope. Most of the time we sin in small ways; we think ill of another person; we back bite; we tell a little lie; we gossip. And most of the time, when we are in our sin we are blind to it. Maybe someone points it out to us that we have sinned against them, or done something that is sinful. But once convicted, and our eyes are opened to the ugliness of our sinfulness, we have a decision to make. Are we going

to repent and ask forgiveness, or are we going to choose to remain stuck in our sinfulness?

And this is where Jesus the Good Shepherd comes in. Jesus does not force us to remain among the flock. We can go our own ways if we choose – that is how much he loves us. But if we choose to be shepherded by him, to have our eyes made open to our sinfulness, then Jesus the Good Shepherd can lead us back into the fold and can make us stronger in our godliness, and once again the gate to eternal life, closed by our sin, is open to us again.

Here in the 10th chapter, long before the passion became a reality, Jesus knew and spoke of his choice to be obedient to his Father's will to lay down his life for those he had been given the duty to shepherd, and more than that, he trusted that he had been given the power to return to life, when life would be taken from him.

Jesus was not speaking of simply giving his life in exchange for the lives of sinful human beings. He was giving his life in exchange for the lives of sinful human beings *so that* sinful human beings could repent and acknowledge their need to be shepherded, and therefore experience the power to live again in the paradise God had intended from the beginning.

For some reason, shepherding has been an image God and Jesus have both seen to be appropriate to illustrate their relationship with his people. We may not find our identification as sheep to be very flattering but we can certainly relate by our behavior. We have not always been faithful or smart or obedient or clean. But we can certainly take comfort in God' and Jesus' identity as our shepherd – if we can make the adjustment to want to be shepherded. If we can do that, we will find that our shepherd is indeed good and true and a model of the godly life and under his watchful care we will safely make our journey home.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

In this passage, we hear about what all Jesus the Good Shepherd will do. But we the people, his sheep have only one thing to do. We need to choose to be shepherded by our Good Shepherd. Remember, at the beginning I told you that there is only one Good Shepherd. There are other shepherds, stand-ins, posers,

fakers – all representatives of the evil one. But there is only one Good Shepherd. And we are not as dumb as sheep. There are things we can do to help ourselves.

1. Know the voice of the Good Shepherd. We can know his voice even now through Bible Study, prayer, and meditation.
2. Learning from his own example, we should become faithful and obedient, and not cause ourselves to become blind by our own sinfulness.

Prayer

Shepherding God, sometimes we wish we were more like sheep. Things would be easier then. We would just roam around doing simple things that simple sheep do. But in your wisdom you created us with intellect, the ability to choose to love you. That seems to be where your plan went awry.

We have not loved you and been faithful to you. We have wandered off and followed other shepherds. We thank you for your love that even when we wander off, you gave your life for ours and opened the gate to eternal life. In appreciation for that, accept our confession, forgive our sins, and bring us to life eternal. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen