

“The Good Shepherd”

John 10: 11-18

This is a familiar passage or at least the image of the Good Shepherd is familiar to us. As soon as we hear the words, “I Am the Good Shepherd”, images come to our minds. Images of us lying beside cool waters. Images of God leading us through the darkest valley and us fearing no evil. We hear the words “I am the Good Shepherd” and immediately our mind goes to Psalm 23 with its comforting words of guidance and assurance of God’s presence. We hear the words “I am the Good Shepherd” and immediately our mind starts thinking about all the times, all the stories, all the references, all the allusions to the Good shepherd that can be found in the Bible. We start thinking about how these images and stories of the Good Shepherd tell us over and over again, that no matter where we go, God will guide us and lead us home.

Now, I sure it seems strange that I am preaching on John 10: 11-18 and I am referencing Psalm 23. It may also seem strange that I am preaching on John 10: 11-18 and I am referencing the parable of the lost sheep. It probably also seems strange that in the first few minutes of preaching today on the parable of the Good Shepherd, that I haven’t even really talked about it yet.

Well, there is a reason of that. When Jesus was telling this story of the Good Shepherd, he knew that everyone would remember all these references to sheep, references to shepherds in the Bible and would think about these stories first. After all, there is over 600 references to sheep and shepherds in the Bible. As soon as he started saying the words “I am the Good Shepherd”, Jesus knew the crowd would immediately remember all these wonderful comforting images found in the Bible of the shepherd leading the sheep, of the shepherd tending the sheep, of the shepherd caring for the sheep. Jesus knew all of this when he began preaching this particular text.

To be honest, that was kind of the point. As usual, Jesus takes the familiar, the image of the Good Shepherd, and the on-going promise of God’s guidance and presence and he pushes us to think about them differently. Jesus pushes us to expand our definition of what exactly makes the Good Shepherd good. He does this so that when we hear the phrase “I Am the Good Shepherd” we will begin understand that he is not simply talking about Jesus and me. Jesus is talking about his relationship to and with all of God’s children here on earth.

Let me explain: You see, it would have been so simple for Jesus to have stop his preaching right after the words “I am the Good Shepherd”. Everyone would have been happy if he had done just that. Same holds true today. I could just read verse 11 and everyone would feel like they have heard the Word of God. Not

because these words make up the greatest sermon on earth. Everyone would have felt like they had heard the word of God as soon as Jesus said, or I had read, “I Am the Good Shepherd” because they are so familiar to us. They have been told to us time and time again. As soon as we hear these words, we remember God’s promises of comfort and abiding presence in our lives.

But Jesus did not end his teaching there. He kept speaking. He kept preaching. Jesus kept teaching. And by doing so, he moves us beyond allowing these words to simply be words of comfort to us. Rather, with these very familiar words, Jesus instead challenges us to widen our understanding of just what it means for us to be a part of God’s flock.

You see, Jesus immediately moves from talking about the Good Shepherd to talking about hired hands watching over the flock. And there are no words of comfort to be found here. In fact, it is pretty scary and dangerous. We are told that the hired hands abandoned the sheep at the first signs of danger, left them to face the wolves by themselves.

For the hired hands, caring for the sheep is just a job. They could care less what happens to the flock, even to the point of running away at the first signs of danger. For the hired hand, there is no relationship to and with the sheep. Shepherding is just a job for them.

Now, we can't be too hard on the hired hands because let's face it. We have all been there. Maybe not hired hands taking care of sheep, but we have all been in a job where it was just that to us. It was a J O B to us. We could have cared less about the company. We were not interested in promotions. It was just a J O B that helped us make some money so that we could do what we really wanted to do with our resources.

For me, that was my first job as a cashier at a clothing store. I could have cared less about that job. Sure, I was on time for my job. I did want they asked me to do but really all that job was for me was an opportunity to make some money so that I could have money to go out with my friends. I never tried to make employee of the month nor did I care if I was employee of the month. It was a J O B to me and I left it as soon as a better opportunity came along.

That's the sort of "it is just a Job mentality that goes against what Jesus is talking about here. He is the Good Shepherd for us and to us. It is more than just a J O B for him. It is a calling. It is his ministry. It is why he came to be among the people of God in the first place. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus was prepared and did lay down his life so that we might live. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus wants us to understand that he will not and he did not abandon us when life gets a little rough. He will watch over us. He will guide us. He will lead us home. There is a deep connected relationship to us here. There is a commitment to us here. Jesus wants us

to hear and to understand this as his followers. His ministry on earth is not a J O B to him with fancy perks and benefit packages. It is the very reason for him being among the people of God. He came so that we might live.

Once again, Jesus could have stopped right there and we would have all felt like we had heard the word of God. But as usual, Jesus keeps preaching. Jesus keeps teaching. Jesus continues to speak by saying that there are others who are not part of this flock yet. And part of his calling as the Good Shepherd is to invite them to do so. He will bring those “others” into his care as well.

Wait, what? Jesus, we were with you when you were talking about being our, meaning our own personal, Good Shepherd. We were with you when you told us that you weren't a hired hand. We were with you when you said that you would be with us, you know the chosen few, you would be with us no matter what life brings our way. But now, Jesus, you've gone too far. Jesus, you are talking crazy, talking about having other sheep who don't belong but you are going to bring them into the fold as well, talking about one flock, one shepherd. Jesus, you go too far when you start talking about this ministry, this very reason for being among the people of God is to share this idea of God's constant presence and abiding love with others. Jesus now, you are talking crazy!

Once again, if Jesus would have just stopped with “I Am the Good Shepherd” then maybe just maybe he would not have upset the powers that be, then maybe just maybe he would not have upset the crowds, then maybe just maybe this whole being a person of God thing would have been easier to live out in our lives. But no, Jesus had to go and talk crazy. Jesus had to go and start making us see that we don’t get to choose who is in or out. Jesus had to go and start expanding our definition, expanding our understanding of exactly just who is in the flock of God.

Jesus, why couldn’t you just leave it at “I Am the Good Shepherd”. Jesus, why couldn’t you just left us alone with our images of comfort and abiding presence of God, left us alone with our thinking that it is just about God supplying all my needs. Jesus, why couldn’t you just left it alone with the idea that it was just Jesus and me, making up the we?

The answer to that question is because ultimately Jesus knew that whatever he said about himself, he also said about God. And God doesn’t exclude. God welcomes all to God’s Table. Just look at the people God chose to be God’s people, a bunch of broken people from dysfunctional families. And still God wanted to be in relationship with them. God still wanted to claim them and named them as God’s own. God promised God’s constant presence and abiding love to all of God’s children, no if’s and or buts.

That's part of the answer to why Jesus couldn't and wouldn't let us keep it only about Jesus and me. The other part can be found in the understanding that Jesus also knew that whatever he said about himself, he also said about his followers. Let me say that again: Whatever language, image, preachings, teachings that Jesus said about himself, he said about his followers.

So when Jesus says, "I Am the Good Shepherd" he also meant that we as his followers are also called to be Good Shepherds to all of God's flock. We are also called to be the Good Shepherd to all of God's children, not just the people we like, not just the people who think like us or act like us. We are called to be the Good Shepherd to all of God's children, providing guidance, giving comfort, supplying their need, leading them beside still waters so that they can find rest, preparing a table before them in the presence of their enemies, watching over them and not abandoning them when danger appears. If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then as his followers, as ones who claim Jesus as our Risen Savior, then we too are called to be Good Shepherds to and for all the people of God.

No longer are these words meant to just comfort us. These words have now become a challenge to us, a challenge for us to become the people God created us to be, become the people God calls us to be. Now the words, "I Am the Good Shepherd" have become our very reason for being among the people of God. No longer can we think of ourselves as hired hands for the Kingdom of God. No

longer can we think of our mission of WELCOME as just a J O B for us, as something that looks good on the front of our bulletin.

These words of WELCOME, these words that call us to be the Good Shepherd to all of God's children are a way of life for us. They are our very reason for being as ones who claim to follow our Risen Savior, Jesus Christ.

This past week was Holocaust Remembrance Day. We've heard stories of the death camps. We've seen pictures of the skeleton faces behind the fences. We've heard the stories of the atrocities that humankind did to one another based on hatred and ignorance. But even in the darkness that surrounds these stories, we are also told of stories of so many Good shepherds, putting their lives on the line as they lead God's people to safety, stories of so many Good Shepherds not acting like hired hands but guiding some of God's flock through the darkest valley, staying with them even when the danger appeared and threatened to overtake the Good Shepherd

One such story came to light this week. "It was World War II, Warsaw was under German occupation, and the wife of the director of the Warsaw zoo spotted Nazis approaching the white stucco villa that she and her family inhabited on the zoo grounds.

According to plan, she went straight to her piano and began to play a lively tune from an operetta by Jacques Offenbach, a signal to Jews being sheltered in the house that they should be quiet and not leave their hiding places.

That scenario, repeated over years of war, was one of the tricks that allowed Jan and Antonina Zabinski to save the lives of dozens of Jews including the life of 78-year-old Moshe Tirosh, who was hidden there for three weeks in 1943, when he was just 6, as well as the Zabinskis' son and daughter, Ryszard and Teresa.

Tirosh can still recall details, even though his time there amounted to just a short spell in a long and dramatic struggle for survival over years of Nazi occupation. He remembers being taken there by a horse-drawn carriage that carried him over the Vistula River to the green gardens of the zoo. He remembers squatting in the cellar with his sister while his parents hid in animal enclosures. He said he was always putting his hand over his sister's mouth when she cried to stifle the sound, which could have given away the hiding place. He also remembers being well fed, compared to periods of near starvation during other periods of the war.

He also remembers Antonina using her piano to send the secret messages, with one melody to warn of danger and a different one to signal that danger had passed.

Interestingly enough it was Antonina, the wife who had closer contacts to the Jews in hiding than her husband. The husband was more active out of the house in his

underground anti-Nazi activities, including by helping Jews escape from the Ghetto near the zoo. By helping Jews the Zabinskis risked not only their own lives but that of their children, with the death penalty for Poles caught helping Jews.

"Antonina is a great woman, a hero," Tirosh said, speaking in an interview with The Associated Press on Friday in Warsaw, where he traveled from his home in Israel to attend the inauguration. "She was also beautiful, smart and wise."

The couple is credited with saving dozens of Jews; though the exact number isn't known it is believed to range from over 100 to 300. Truly just one more story of someone who understood what it means to be a Good shepherd for the people of God.

Jesus knew that whatever he said about himself, he said about God. And whatever he said about himself, he also said about his followers. Let me say that again: Whatever language, image, preachings, teachings that Jesus said about himself, he said about his followers.

So when Jesus says, "I Am the Good Shepherd" he also meant that we as his followers were also called to be Good Shepherds to all of God's flock. We are also called to be the Good Shepherd to all of God's children, not just the people we like, not just the people who think like us or act like us. We are called to be the

Good Shepherd to all of God' children, providing guidance, giving comfort, supplying their need, leading them beside still waters so that they can find rest, preparing a table before them in the presence of their enemies, watching over them and not abandoning them when danger appears. We are called to be the Good Shepherd to all of God's creation.

So this day and all days, May we have the strength and the courage to follow our Good Shepherd's call and become the good shepherds that God created us to be, calls us to be for all of God's children. No longer can it be just a J O B for us. It is our calling. it is our ministry. it is the very reason for us being among the people of God bringing healing and wholeness to all of God's children. Today and all days, we are the Good Shepherd. Amen.