

“SHEPHERD SAVIOR.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: John 10:11-18, 27-30

Introduction.

To the first century Middle Eastern ear these words from John 10 were a sweet sound. Those words grounded in the long history of an agrarian people were rich in meaning and truth.

“Before men dared to think of God as their Father, they called Him their Shepherd” (Charles Jefferson, *The Minister as Shepherd*, p. 14).

When Jacob stretched out his hands to bless his son Joseph he said God had been his Shepherd all the days of his life (Gen. 48:15).

The greatest heroes of our faith tended sheep. All of the OT patriarchs, the greatest of the lawgivers Moses, the sweetest of the poets David, and some of the mightiest of the prophets were all shepherds (see Jefferson, p. 40-41).

One of the greatest Psalms, Psalm 23, was written by a shepherd who realized he had a shepherd and so he wrote from the perspective of a sheep who had a relationship with a shepherd.

Psalm 23 begins with a stunning truth. This universe we live in and this earth we live on are created and sustained by a *shepherd God*. The great Almighty, all-knowing, creator God of the universe compares Himself to a shepherd. The Lord is our shepherd, we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care. We live in a world created by a *shepherd God* and we live in a world redeemed by a *shepherd Savior*.

Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd three times in our passage. How good is our Shepherd Savior, and how is He good?

A Good Shepherd knows His sheep.

Like dairy farming, shepherding is an intimate business, it involves knowing your sheep and the condition of your flock. It means being close to them and being involved with them. You can't shepherd from a distance or call it in.

Jesus knows His sheep. He came to dwell right in our midst. He knows everything there is to know about His own sheep, He knows their background, their families, where they

live, what they do, He knows every detail of their history, their circumstances, their experiences, their trials and hardships. From the least to the greatest there is not one thing He doesn't know.

Think about the people you pray for often. You know them pretty well, don't you? Praying for someone creates a greater intimacy. Consider Jesus prays for each of His sheep by name every day. How well do you think He knows His sheep?

And get this, with as much as He knows about each one of us, He doesn't despise any of us. In fact, He loves us more because He knows us so well.

Psalm 139:1-4, 6, 17-18 O Lord, you have searched me and known me!

2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar.

3 You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

4 Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

18 If I would count them, they are more than the sand.

David didn't say the Lord is a shepherd, the Lord is my shepherd. Our Shepherd Savior is a good shepherd, He knows His sheep and His sheep know Him.

A Good Shepherd cares for His sheep.

Christian authors who write about sheep and shepherds are often quick to point out that sheep are weak and helpless and not too bright. But that misses the main point Jesus wants to make. Sheep are completely dependent on their shepherd.

The many ways the shepherd cares for sheep shows how dependent the sheep are on Him. We would do well to humble ourselves and admit we are just as dependent. I got a small reminder of this these past three days. I had absolutely no control over so many things and was completely dependent on planes and airports, traffic and winter weather, those planning a funeral, etc.

Barry missed preaching today by 10 minutes. They closed Midway Airport in Chicago at 7 last night, my flight left at 6:50. God wanted me to remind me what care and grace looks like.

And that was small, compared to a wife widowed at the age of 56 who finds herself not in control and totally dependent on God.

There are so many facets of Jesus' shepherd-like care of His sheep. He feeds and waters and provides for all their needs in the wilderness of this world. He leads them on the best

and right paths. He picks them up when they are fallen, broken, wounded, weak. He doesn't cast off the lame or the slow or the wandering that are His.

He protects His sheep and guards them from danger and from enemies. When He brings His flock home to His Father's house, it will be discovered that Jesus did not lose a single one, not one.

Jesus contrasts the care of a good shepherd with a hired hand. Most of us have some kind of experience with this that helps us understand.

Business owners care about their business, they invest themselves in it, they go to work early, stay up late, they sacrifice for it. Employees don't have the same level of interest or concern. Their heart isn't it the way the owners is. (Al and Sue).

Parents care more about their own children than other people's children. Pastor's care more about their own church than other churches. We care more for a home we own than one we rent. We care about what is ours. Jesus cares for what is His.

We belong to Jesus, we are His sheep, we shall not want for what we most need. Our shepherd Savior is a good Shepherd because of how well He cares for His sheep.

A Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep.

Four times in this text Jesus says He lays down His life for His sheep. This is the most distinguishing mark of a good shepherd. This contrasts the thief or robber. This contrasts the hireling. Jesus would rather die than lose one of His own. This shows the depth of His love and devotion and commitment.

Real shepherds don't intentionally give up their life. They are willing to but they don't intent to. After all if the shepherd dies the sheep are in real trouble. But it's different with the Good Shepherd.

When there was nothing else that could be done to save His sheep from sin and Satan and hell, He laid down his own life, He died in the place of His sheep. The Shepherd became a Lamb so He could be offered up as a perfect, unblemished, sin sacrifice for the sake of His sheep.

John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

I saw a real picture of this in Albania in 1997. A huge pyramid scheme collapsed and tens of thousands of Albanians lost their life savings leading to massive uprisings and chaos. As things spiraled out of control the US sent navy ships off shore and used helicopters to ferry Americans from the US Embassy to the ships. The US State department urged all

Americans out of Albania. Other countries did the same, most foreigners and missionaries left.

Von Golder who has preached here a couple of times was the missionary pastor of a large church in the capital at the time. After weeks of prayer and discussion, they agreed and he took his wife and three kids to the Embassy and put them on a helicopter, but he stayed. His reason, the shepherd doesn't leave the sheep. He was one of only a very few missionaries who stayed through the nine months or so of the crisis.

He went to sleep each night hearing Kalashnikov rifles being fired into the air. In the mornings he would find bullets in their courtyard. Von's credibility and reputation rose tremendously during that time. His congregation felt loved and cared for, that he would put his life on the line like that.

Let me ask you a question. If someone does something really nice for you, which would make you feel more loved, if they did it gladly or if they did it out of duty?

Wives, if your husband comes home with a huge bouquet of a roses and you ask him why and he says because it's his duty as your husband, how would you feel? But if your husband said he was thinking of you all day and how lucky he was to be married to the greatest wife in the world, how would you respond then?

The depth of our Shepherd Savior's love for us is that He has been thinking of us from before the foundations of the world. He came in complete freedom to willingly, gladly, eagerly, joyfully to lay down His life for us. He was born so He could die for us.

No, He did not enjoy the extreme pain and suffering. But that didn't stop Him from freely and willingly doing what He came to do and what He wanted to do.

Our Shepherd Savior loves us with a love that cannot be measured or exhausted. As Paul prays, only by the Holy Spirit can we begin to know how wide and long and high and deep is Christ's love for us (Ephesians 3:17-19).

And get this. His life was not taken from Him. Jesus made a special point to make this very clear.

John 10:18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.

The betrayal of Judas, the armed band from the High Priest, the hatred of the Pharisees, the injustice of Pontius Pilate and Herod, the crowds yelling crucify Him, the whips and nails and spear of the Roman Soldiers, none of those had any power over Jesus to so much as harm one hair on His head. He was not crucified because forces outside of His control prevailed.

Jesus voluntarily chose to put on a body, He voluntarily chose when He would lay it down and when He would take it up again.

What Jesus did for us was the deepest desire of His heart to do, so great is His love for us.

Do you ever hear a voice whispering that Jesus' doesn't love you or Jesus' doesn't think much of you, or Jesus is disappointed in you? Do you ever entertain thoughts that you aren't good enough or your life is too messed up?

It was Jesus' pure joy to lay down His life for you. He would do it again if it was necessary. He doesn't have a single regret for what He did for you and me, not one.

Though I walk through death's valley I will fear no evil, my shepherd has already died for me.

Our Shepherd Savior was a willing Savior, a loving Savior, a truly Great Shepherd Savior.

A Good Shepherd rewards His sheep with the very best gifts.

John 10:28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

The depth of Christ love for us is seen in how richly and generously He bestows His benefits on us. If we could grasp even the half of awaited us in heaven we would be utterly overwhelmed. Our hearts wouldn't be able to take it.

Christ, as a Shepherd Savior, is able to forgive our many sins and grant us full pardon. He is able to cloth us in His perfect righteousness, so that we can be taken into eternal glory.

Our shepherd Savior is good because He restores our souls to what they were created for, eternal life.

We are surrounded by powerful enemies trying to snatch eternal life from us, wolves and predators, and we are just sheep, we are weak and vulnerable, but God is greater. Our salvation rests on Him and not on us.

He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. If God is for us, who can be against us?

Once you are adopted you can't be un-adopted. Once you are grafted into His vine, you cannot be cut off. Once you are in Christ's hands, no one and nothing can pull you from His grip.

Our eternal life is as sure and certain as God's power is invincible. How strong is God? That's how secure our salvation is because we are kept in His strong hands.

In every trial, in every difficulty, remember who you are and whose you are. Lean on Him and depend on Him. By faith listen for His voice, follow His lead, submit to His guidance.

Implications and application.

Shepherds and sheep are a beautiful picture of the relationship between our Savior and us. That Jesus calls us "my sheep" speaks of how Jesus views those who follow Him.

We are His sheep because He chose us and called us by His voice and knows us.
We are His sheep because He is the one who cares for us, feeds us, keeps us, preserves us.
We are His sheep because He has willingly paid a great price for us and given a great gift to us.

What a blessing and privilege to have a Shepherd Savior who knows us so completely, cares for and provides for us so perfectly, and loves us so much to die for us so willingly.

It does us absolutely no good that Jesus is a Shepherd Savior if during our life we have ignored His voice and have never followed Him as closely as we can. If we really love life, then we cannot have a better life than to listen to our Savior's voice and follow Him wherever He leads.

Think on these things. We belong to a shepherd Savior. He knows us, He protects us, He provides for us, He leads us, He guides us. We are His and He is ours.

Think about this today and this season. Talk about this at your meals. Ask your kids and grandkids what it means when Jesus calls Himself a shepherd. What does it mean when we are called sheep?

Reflect this Advent season in your hearts and homes. We are the sheep of a good Shepherd Savior.