

Someone to Watch Over Me

John 10: 11-18

Today we explore one of the most beloved images of God in the entire Bible: the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Today, we will explore this text in 3 ways, so that hopefully one of them will touch your heart. We will read from scripture John 10:11-18, where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd, then we will hear it as depicted in song (maybe a different song than you might be expecting), and then we will explore it in sermon. This passage gets to the heart of what Jesus felt about himself and it gets to the heart of who we are as his followers as well.

Read John 10:11-18. Pray. (Soloist at 8:30 and 11:00; At 9:43 play “Someone to Watch Over Me” video here)

George & Ira Gerschwin hit it right on the head when they wrote the song, “Someone to Watch Over Me.” This song sums up our very human desire, male or female, to feel safe and cared for, in an unsafe and impersonal world – someone to watch over me with loving intent and our best interest at heart. As human beings, we are born into this world with a set of parents whose God-given job it is to look after us and provide for our every need.

Psychologists tell us that young children have a “morality of security.” For young kids, “good” is anything that makes them feel safe; “bad” is anything that makes them feel anxious or fearful. Parents are important in a young child’s life because they make them feel secure in an insecure world.

As adolescents and young adults, we reach out to boyfriends and girlfriends, not only because of surging hormones, but also out of a need to feel loved and cherished. Some psychologists even speculate that we carry that desire into adulthood as we search for our mate, our partner, who will continue to provide a protective, loving environment in which we can live out our lives. Psychologists would say that we subconsciously end up marrying people who remind us of our mothers and fathers out of a desire to recapture some of that childlike sense of being loved and protected as children. (Kushner, Harold S., *The Lord is My Shepherd*, First Anchor Books, 2003). Indeed, we all want someone to watch over us.

Whatever the psychology might be, there is simply no doubt that deep in the heart of every one of us is a longing to feel loved and protected and safe. The authors of the Bible, who were human themselves, understood this desire and wrote words to us in scripture that meet that human desire head on. It is found in the prevalent imagery of God as a shepherd watching over his sheep.

In the Old Testament, we have the 23rd psalm, which may just be the most familiar scripture verse in the entire Bible. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” It’s read at most funerals, but it is a passage we all need to keep in our hearts during our lives as well. “The Lord is my Shepherd . . . he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.” The God of the Old Testament leads us to good things and restores our souls. He is the one to watch over us.

This imagery is found in other Old Testament passages as well, like Psalm 80 (Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock); Isaiah 40 (God will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep); and who can forget that the most beloved King in the Old Testament, King David, the God-chosen leader of Israel, was born a shepherd boy and plucked out of the fields by God and anointed as King.

And so, in the New Testament, Jesus knowingly takes up this shepherd imagery and applies it to himself, as the Son of God. In the Gospel of John, just prior to our scripture passage for today, we see Jesus heal the man who was born blind, and when the Pharisees criticize him for healing on the Sabbath, Jesus moves into this shepherd imagery from the Old Testament that the Pharisees are familiar with, and speaks his famous words. In verse 11, Jesus says:

“I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

What does it mean that Jesus is the Good Shepherd?

Even though most of us don’t see shepherds on a regular basis, we all know that a shepherd is one who watches over the sheep. It is his job to make sure that the sheep have food, water, and are safe from harm. We picture the shepherd standing right there with the sheep, watching over them at all times. That’s what a good shepherd does.

When I was in Haiti, one of the things that I noticed (because I am an animal person) was that they were lacking in shepherds. They had cows, they had goats, they had some sheep, but they had no one to watch over them. If a family got an animal, they would just put it outside and let it roam wherever it wants to roam. At any given point in the day, they had no idea where it was. The animals would just wander around and find food/water on their own – and the result of this was that they were the skinniest cows and goats I have ever seen. There simply was no shepherd for the sheep.

In contrast, when there is a shepherd, it’s the shepherd’s job to find the food, the water and the safety. Without the shepherd, the sheep wander without provisions or purpose. This is the calling to which Jesus came. He came to be the shepherd for the sheep, the one who leads

into the green pastures, into the still water, and restores souls. Jesus' devotion to the sheep is so strong that he even lays down his life for them.

This is what we call a "Christological image" here in John 10. It is an image of who Christ is. Here, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises to God's people. He is showing us that he is the one who leads the sheep in love, watches over the sheep with caring, and sacrifices himself for the sheep when the time comes. He is not a warrior, he is not a soldier, he is a shepherd. And he loves his sheep. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, fulfills our need for someone to watch over us like no one else can ever do.

But, of course, this is only one side of the equation, because the shepherd is incomplete without his sheep – John 10 reveals who Jesus is in relationship to the sheep. The shepherd and the sheep are linked together. The shepherd's identity determines the sheep's identity.

And guess what folks, we are the sheep!

What does being the sheep mean for our lives?

Well, if we take our cues from John 10, we see that Jesus says: "There will be one flock." One flock. That's a really hard thing to grasp, because we are NOT one flock. We are so good at dividing ourselves into all sorts of different flocks. Whether it's on the basis of church tradition, theology, or even just geography, we are experts at putting up walls between us and the other sheep in the pasture. But Christ is always about unity; he is always about coming together as one flock and following the one shepherd; Jesus, the Good Shepherd, needs to be the source of our unity. It is to this unity that the shepherd calls us. Can you just imagine if all Christians all over the world would stop our haggling and stop our fighting and become one flock? It's a dream that maybe one day will come true.

The second thing that being sheep means for our lives is that we are all the same to Jesus – we are all his sheep. There are simply no gradations here like, "These sheep are better, and these sheep over here get the best grass, and these sheep over here get the cleanest water, and these sheep over here get the best protection." No, Jesus says. "I lay down my life for the sheep." For all of the sheep, every single one of them, equally. We humans are the ones who consider some people to be better than others, due to income or birth or how we look or how we dress or who we hang out with or what kind of car we drive. Jesus sees us all as his sheep and loves us all the same.

Friends, the meaning of John 10 is very plain and very important, and when you couple it with the 23rd psalm of the Old Testament, you get an unforgettable image of who Christ really is. He is the heavenly figure who watches over his flock. Once you grasp this, once you take it into

your heart that Jesus Christ is your shepherd, that he will never let you go, he will never leave you alone, he will never forsake you, then your life will be much more peaceful, your heart will be much more at rest, and you will be able to face whatever life throws at you.

I wanted to close this morning with an example of this that comes from the other side of the world, from North Africa, where life as a Christian can be quite difficult. As a church, we support a missionary family who live and works in North Africa. A few weeks ago, they asked us to pray for a woman who had become a Christian after being born Muslim. Due to her faith in Jesus, she was beaten by her family, she was refused access to her grandchildren, she received death threats, her apartment was ransacked, she had feces wiped on her front door and eventually, as you might imagine, she was arrested.

While she was incarcerated, the guards asked her, "You are an old woman, why would you change your religion now?" She told them, "Because now, I know the truth." As she sat in her holding cell, another woman who was there also asked her how it was that she could remain so calm when her life was literally at stake. "I have less serious charges against me," said the woman, "and I am more terrified than you." Very calmly, the Christian woman responded that she was so calm in the face of her dire circumstances because she knew that Christ was with her, helping her to be brave and strong. Eventually, the guards let her go. She knew in her heart that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, that he watches over her, and that he has laid down his life for her, one of his beloved sheep.

This who our Christ is, my friends. Someone to watch over me. And our identity as sheep cannot be separated from Jesus' identity as the Good Shepherd. We are to love, we are to care, we are to watch over the weak among us, and we are to give up our lives, if necessary. What might that look like for this sheepfold right here, right now, in Washington, Pennsylvania?

Praise be to God. Amen.