

## **The Good Shepherd**

### **John 10:1-15**

I've heard it said several times this week: "We are in unprecedented times." In the attempts to slow down the spread of COVID-19, we are seeing things unfold that we have never seen before. Professional sports are shut down, March Madness is shut down, high school tournaments and sports are cancelled, concerts, conferences, Disney World, international flights... On Friday Governor Evers decided to shut down public schools for 2½ weeks. Many bigger churches have cancelled their services this weekend.

Then there is the turmoil in the financial world. The stock market was at record highs in February and within a couple weeks has experienced record-breaking drops and volatility. With all the cancellations and travel restrictions, service businesses and employees are facing sudden financial crisis. If you've been to Wal-Mart or other household goods stores lately you know that shopping for toilet paper and hand sanitizer is kind of like being part of a gold rush.

Things are pretty crazy right now and as we look into the near future there's a lot of uncertainty. What's going to happen next? Will there be an outbreak in our community? Will people in our families and our church get sick? Will you get sick?

The sermon I was planning to preach for today hasn't changed, but the relevancy and application has taken on a more pinpointed focus in light of what we're going through. In our series of the "I am" statements of Jesus, we've been seeking to experience a deeper relationship with him by looking more closely at who he is – who he's revealed himself to be. And the questions I have for you to consider this morning are: "How has your relationship with Jesus stood up in the face of a global pandemic? How has it helped you cope with the fear of getting sick? How has it helped you to cope with financial uncertainty? Has it made a significant difference for you as you've watched the turmoil going on all around our world? Has it been able to provide peace in the midst of all the fear?"

There are all kinds of promises in God's Word for you to hold onto during times like these – promises that can bring peace and security. Just go on Facebook and you'll see what they are – all kinds of Christians and church leaders have all kinds of good things to say. But none of those promises does you any good if they

aren't coming from someone whom you have a close, personal, functional relationship with. Without a close, personal relationship with Jesus, they're just words on a page in your Bible or on Facebook. A global pandemic can reveal a lot about where your relationship with Jesus is really at, and maybe this morning you recognize you're not as close as you should be. Maybe you realize that your relationship with Christ is pretty shallow and doesn't really hold you up in the face of life's difficulties. Maybe you realize you need to go deeper – you need to connect more – you want to have a connection that will keep you secure. I believe the teaching of Jesus we will be looking at this morning can help with that.

One of the major obstacles I think all of us face when it comes to connecting with Christ is that he's no longer physically present with us here on earth. The early disciples had the benefit of actually seeing, hearing, and touching him, but we do not. In most cases, our closest relationships develop and grow because we are able to physically interact with one another. But the one relationship that we need to be closer than any other is with someone who is not physically present with us at all. I've often thought of how difficult that makes it for me to connect with Christ.

Amy will tell you, if I'm going to be able to connect and grow in relationship with someone, I need to be physically present with them. One of the biggest issues we had to work through in our pre-marital counselling was that over half of our 3 years of dating and engagement were long-distance. And that was back in the day when you didn't have mobile phones or laptops to do texting or video calling. So our communication consisted of occasional phone calls and writing letters. And our premarital counsellor pointed out that during times when we were apart, as time went on, I would think about Amy less and less.

He compared my attention to a wagon without a tailgate. There were only so many things that could get my attention and fit on the wagon. And the things that were happening right in front of me would get the front row, while things that weren't in front of me and didn't have my direct attention would get pushed back. Eventually, if something didn't get my attention for long enough, it fell off the back of the wagon. And it really didn't matter what it was or how important it was. So there were times when Amy and I would be apart for several weeks or even months and she would eventually fall off the back of the wagon. It was a classic case of "out of sight, out of mind."

So when it comes to my relationship with Christ, I find it very difficult to experience ongoing closeness with him because I'm never physically present with him. That's the same struggle we all share to differing degrees. How can you grow close to someone you don't physically see, hear, or touch? This is where I find the next "I am" statement to be very helpful. Of all the "I am" statements we have looked at so far, this one gets to the heart of how Jesus wants us to relationally experience him in a close, personal way. And he gives us an image to take hold of that can help us quickly connect with him and experience his love for us.

Two weeks ago we started looking at a passage from John 10 where Jesus was teaching a crowd of people using the imagery of ancient Israelite shepherding. He talked about a sheepfold that was a fortress of safety and rest and provided the way to abundant life for the sheep. We looked at how there was only one way into that sheepfold, which was through the door. We saw how God is like that sheepfold – he is our fortress of safety, rest, and abundant life and Jesus is the way into that fortress. Jesus is the door of the sheepfold.

But Jesus says he is something else within that context as well and that's what we're going to look at this morning.

Read John 10:1-11.

*"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. <sup>2</sup> But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup> To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. <sup>5</sup> A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers."* <sup>6</sup> This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup> So Jesus again said to them, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.*

<sup>8</sup> *All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. <sup>11</sup> I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

For those of us who struggle with being able to connect with Christ and experience him in a personal way, I believe Jesus wants to help us by pointing us to the intimate relationship between a sheep and a shepherd. Most of us have the ability to put ourselves into that scenario and imagine what it would be like to be loved by a shepherd.

Jesus began this teaching by talking about a good shepherd and his relationship with the sheep. He was talking about himself and his people, but the crowd didn't understand him until he said what we read in verse 11. So to begin to see what Jesus wants us to see about him being the good shepherd, we need to start by looking at the first 6 verses in this chapter. In the first two verses he portrays the difference between a thief and a shepherd and then in verse 3 he begins to explain some personal aspects of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep that help us understand Jesus' relationship with us.

In verse 3 he says: *“To him [the shepherd] the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”*

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, he's talking about his relationship with you. And the first thing he points out is that there will be times in your life when you will hear him calling out to you. The sheep in the sheepfold were going about their business, mingling around with the other sheep. Things were probably pretty crowded, they were probably bumping into one another; they were probably hearing all the noises of the other sheep, paying attention to what was happening right around them, when suddenly in the midst of all the noise and hubbub, they heard something – something that made their ears perk up and their heads turn. Something that brought them a sense that it was time to go out and begin grazing. And that something was the voice of their shepherd calling out to them. He was calling them to join him and follow him out to pasture.

According to what I've learned from various sources, sheep have the amazing ability to recognize the voice of their shepherd distinctly from any other. Sheepfolds had no need for stalls or dividers to keep the flocks separate because as soon as the sheep from one flock heard the voice of their shepherd, they would go to him and the rest would not. Sheep respond to the voice of their shepherd. They recognize him. And even more than that, shepherds had the ability to

recognize their sheep. They knew them so well that they identified them individually and called them by name.

Did you know that there are times when Jesus calls directly to you? Jesus knows you by name and speaks personally to you. This certainly includes his calling to you to believe in him for salvation and begin following him. Jesus alludes to that later in this chapter in verse 16 when he says: *“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.”* Also in verses 27-28: *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup> I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”*

But that is not the only time Jesus calls to you. In fact, if we would learn to listen and hear his voice, I believe we would hear Jesus calling to us often. He speaks to us at the soul-level as our good shepherd. David wrote about this calling in Psalm 42:7 where he describes it as, “Deep calls to deep.” He’s talking about a communication that happens deep in your soul when the Spirit of God calls out personally to you.

Jesus is your good shepherd who calls to you and he wants you to learn to hear his voice and listen. Sometimes people think everything they hear in their spirit is a word from the Lord. The reality is there can be many voices inside our heads speaking to us and some of them can be very deceptive and destructive – those are the thieves and robbers and we shouldn’t listen to them. We need to learn to hear the voice of our Savior. We need to get away with Jesus to spend time with him and spend time reading his Word so we learn to hear his voice and know when he’s speaking. Jesus can speak to your heart when you’re reading and meditating on Scripture, but he can do so at other times as well – just know that you will never hear anything from the Lord that will go against the counsel of Scripture. There’s a lot to learn about this, but for today I just want you to see the precious reality that Jesus calls directly to you. He knows you personally and deeply and he wants you to hear his voice and trust in him.

Jesus continues to describe his relationship with us in verse 4: *“When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.”*

To lead a flock of sheep, you don't drive them from behind like you do with cattle, you lead them from the front. (Picture) The shepherd goes before, leading the way, and the sheep follow. Upon hearing the voice of their shepherd, the sheep follow him as he leads them out of the sheepfold and into the surrounding countryside where he takes them to graze in the pastures and drink clean water.

Phil Keller, in his book A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, points out that a shepherd isn't guessing where to take his sheep to pasture because he has gone there before. He has scouted out the territory and is aware of all the dangers and pitfalls. He knows of the difficult valleys and rocky trails and he skillfully leads them through. He knows the way because he's walked the road before. He's suffered before leading them through suffering. But it's by passing through these difficult trails and valleys that he brings them to greener pastures and quiet waters. He knows the way and the reward. And as the sheep listen to his voice and follow, they make it through.

In that same way, Jesus, as our good shepherd, leads the way for us through all the highs and lows and difficult trails and valleys of this life. He went so far as to come to earth and become a man so that he could experience pain and suffering. Hebrews 2:15 says he became like us in every way and because of that Hebrews 4:15 says he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. He goes before us to lead the way. And even now, though he is not with us physically anymore, he is still with us by his Spirit, leading the way. You will not face anything your good shepherd hasn't already faced and isn't willing to go through with you. He is before you, leading the way.

The third place he describes his relationship with us as our good shepherd is in verses 11-15.

John 10:11-15

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup> He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. <sup>14</sup> I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.*

When a shepherd brought his sheep out to pasture there were times when predators would find them and try to attack them in order to find an easy meal. King David talked about killing a bear and lion that were trying to attack his flock, here, Jesus talks about a wolf. There was only one thing that stood between a wolf and a flock of sheep when they were out on the pasture and that was the shepherd. If the shepherd didn't step in and face the predator, the sheep would be slaughtered. So the shepherd had to put his life on the line to rescue his sheep.

Jesus is exactly that kind of shepherd. He told the crowd he was teaching: "I lay down my life for the sheep." And that's exactly what he did. The greatest danger we as sheep face are the consequences for our own sin. Because of our sin against God, we have earned ourselves a death sentence. Rom. 6:23 says "For the wages of sin is death." Death and condemnation is headed our way like a predator heading for a flock of sheep. But Jesus came to our rescue and confronted that predator head on. He laid down his life by dying on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. He condemned sin in sinful man and Rom. 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Jesus stood firm in the face of our greatest danger and willingly laid down his life for us.

I don't know about you, but these images of Jesus as our good shepherd are extremely helpful to me. One of the first things I think about is a picture we had in our nursery at home when the kid's were babies. (Picture) I think that's how Jesus wants you to feel and experience him. No, he's not with us physically, but he is with us. He is always with us. He is always with you. He is like a good shepherd that never leaves his sheep. As you go through your life on earth he is speaking to you, he is calling to you. When you take the time to listen and you learn to hear his voice, you will hear him speak to you deeply in your heart. He is before you leading the way. There is nothing you will face in this life that he hasn't gone through in some way himself or that he won't go through with you. He is near; he is holding you. And his love for you is so deep and so profound that he laid down his life for you. He died so that you could live.

That's the image Jesus gives to help us connect with him. And if all the turmoil of this pandemic has shown you that you need to find a way to connect more closely to him, I encourage you to think about him in this way. Think about yourself as that sheep that Jesus is holding to closely and securely. That's not just a thing of

our imaginations – it's a reality. Listen to him whispering in your ear all those promises that can help you during this time of fear. Feel his strong arms holding you secure: "I am with you. I am sovereign. I am in control. I will work out all things for your good."

And then, I think he wants to take it one step further – especially in times like these when we could see some real needs among the people around us. After humbling himself and washing the dirty feet of his disciples, Jesus said in John 13:34-35: "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" This is not a time for Christians to only focus on themselves; it's also a time for us to demonstrate the love we've been given by our shepherd by loving the people around us in the same way. Use wisdom and use caution so you don't add to the problems and fear going on around us, but when opportunities arise for you to help out a neighbor or a friend, take that opportunity to meet that need and demonstrate the love of Christ.