

The Fully Sufficient Christ
John 10:11-18

What is your favorite single line of scripture? Very likely, I am guessing, your response is the first line of the twenty-third psalm: *“The Lord is my shepherd.”* You and I love that line, even though we seldom see sheep and probably have never watched a shepherd at work. There is something about that statement that makes us feel loved, provided for, and protected. That God would care for us as a shepherd cares for his sheep is a thought that is deeply reassuring.

There was a fondness for this concept even in the time of Jesus. That’s one reason he chose this image to describe himself and his relationship with his followers. Between chapters six and fifteen the Gospel of John presents seven symbols that Jesus used to depict himself and his ministry. These symbols can draw us to Jesus and help deepen our personal experience with him.

Much of the time we make affirmations about Jesus. We say that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah; we call Jesus the Son of God or the Savior of the world; and we say that Jesus is our Lord and Master. These so-called post-resurrection statements about Jesus are meaningful and helpful. But they often seem a little distant. The symbols that Jesus used of himself are more personal. According to John, Jesus gave seven “I am” sayings: “I am the bread of life” (6:35); “I am the light of the world” (8:12); “I am the gate for the sheep” (10:7); “I am the good shepherd” (10:11); “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25); “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6); and “I am the true vine” (15:1).

Do you see my point? Bread, light, guidance, sustenance, hope—the things suggested by these symbols—touch our everyday lives. These are the things we need for survival. It is appropriate that we speak of Jesus as a friend and companion. He has given us his spirit, and it is right that we experience life with him. I think that’s the reason for these beautiful figures of speech. Through these familiar symbols Jesus declared that human needs are met in and through him.

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Today we focus on the symbol of the shepherd. Perhaps you have difficulty appreciating this concept. Last Monday Cathy and I drove to Roswell to visit her grandson Cash. (*Well, we also visited her son Travis and his wife Scottie.*) Between Calhoun Falls and Elberton we came upon a pasture filled with sheep, maybe as many as two hundred. I looked but saw no shepherd. What we did see was a sturdy fence around the field. I compared that scene with one I recall from a trip to Israel. In a remote area of Galilee the driver and guide stopped the bus to allow our band of tourists to watch a shepherd at work. A man was slowly walking along through very rugged terrain with scores of sheep around him. They seemed to be spilling out in all directions. Patiently the shepherd pulled the strays back in line and waited for those who found a few sprigs of grass to eat. That's the picture that comes to mind when I think of Jesus as the "good shepherd."

Specifically, this symbol reminds us that God through Christ comes to us in a personal, loving way. God had created us in his image and has given us his spirit. You would expect that we would bring ourselves under God's care, trust and follow in obedience, and arrange our priorities according to the way God has shown. In short, you would think that we would gladly commit ourselves to a life in constant reference to the eternal reality of God..

Sadly, that is not the way we choose to live our lives. We are more inclined to go our own way and to orient our lives according to our own wishes. The prophet Isaiah recognized that tendency long ago. He wrote, "We had all strayed like sheep, each of us going his own way" (53:6). There is a word that describes this characteristic of ours. We use it today with some reluctance, but it remains apt. The word is "lost." We get lost in our fear and anxiety and hostility. We are unable to judge people and events clearly. Through the good shepherd God seeks us out.

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Do you remember the story of the lost sheep? “If one of you has a hundred sheep,” Jesus said, “and loses one of them, does he not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is missing until he finds it? And when he does, he lifts it joyfully on his shoulders!” (*Luke 15:4-5*) That’s God’s estimate of our value. We are of infinite worth in God’s sight. In a personal way Jesus the good shepherd comes to find us.

This figure also indicates that God has a complete understanding of our personal needs. The very idea of the shepherd connotes gentle and consistent care. In ancient Palestine the shepherd was absolutely responsible for the sheep under his supervision. If anything happened to one of them, he had to produce proof that he was not at fault. There were stories of shepherds who fought to the death defending their sheep against robbers or animals. Jesus said, “*The hired man, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, . . . I lay down my life for the sheep.*” This is a pointed reference to Jesus’ willingness to die for the sake of his mission and his followers.

We have here a remarkable statement of God’s care. It notes Jesus’ desire to care for us. Through Christ God has shown in unmistakable ways that he is “for” us, that his help is always near.

You and I have deep-seated needs. We need a life that is in constant reference to God. A habitual search for God’s will and guidance in decision-making is key to a satisfying life. We are not always conscious of that, but we are haunted when we neglect that search. If you are a part of a family where there is love and concern, you find yourself relating your whole world to your family. You make decisions based on the needs and wishes of other family members. You seek to enhance the closeness and affection you feel together. And you discover a feeling of security and hope within the family circle. In the same way, as you relate every experience to God, you find a life that is secure and rewarding. We need that sense of connection.

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And we need the constant awareness of God's presence. As we face the difficulties of being human, agonize over lonely decisions, and meet opposition and sometimes rejection, we are tempted to lose confidence in ourselves, in others, and finally in God. We need communion. We need to know that we are in relationship with God.

A. J. Gossip was an English military chaplain and pastor in the first part of the last century. He was gifted with a creative way of delivering the gospel message. He once told of a break his company took from the trenches of World War I. His men were on the coast of France just across the channel from their beloved England. Word came that the German forces had broken through the lines and were moving toward the coast. The English soldiers prepared to return to combat.

Gossip said that he looked at "young men so soon to be sacrificed, and my heart became sore and resentful. Waiting for the time at which we were due to fall in, I turned down an enticing little lane, winding and twisting between fields ablaze with flowers, golden and blue. And suddenly I came upon a French shepherd boy, not driving his flock, and with no dog, but walking on ahead of his sheep, leading them to safety. And every now and then he paused to call a laggard, which hearing its name, came at once, running, and affectionately rubbing itself against him. So they moved on, over a ridge, and out of my life."

But Gossip said the scene never left him. It was a lasting picture of the good shepherd, guiding his flock through danger and death to safety.

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