

4th Sunday of Easter, B 2021

Acts 4:8-12; Psalm 118; I John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18

The Gospel of John is unique. Whereas the gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke are called synoptic or similar, John's gospel holds a compelling place of its own in its recording of Jesus' life and self-revelation. In John's Gospel Jesus describes himself with 7 "I Am statements" - each revealing the richness and fulness of Jesus' divine love and purpose in the world. The seven self-identifying statements of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John are:

I am the bread of Life

I am the Light of the World

I am the door

I am the true vine

I am the way, the truth, and the life

I am the resurrection and the life and

I am the Good Shepherd.

These are beautiful and powerful statements of who Jesus is and what he offers to us and to the world. We could spend a lifetime exploring the depth of each one.

This morning we heard Jesus refer to himself twice as the "Good Shepherd". The Good Shepherd knows his flock and freely lays down his life for his sheep. We also heard from I John, "See what love God has for us that we should be called children of God and that is what we are." The Good Shepherd is an image of God's great and limitless love for us.

While shepherds and their sheep are not something we see very often in our country, in Biblical times the scene was part of the fabric of life. Thus, the image of a shepherd is used throughout the bible.

One of the most comforting passages in all of Scripture is Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul...." King David, who wrote this Psalm, was once a shepherd himself and thus knew well the difference a good shepherd makes, especially when that shepherd is God.

The Prophet Ezekiel wrote: For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak." (*Ezekiel 34:11-16a*).

Jesus is the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophesy. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost and those who have strayed. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who binds up the injured, uplifts the weak and brings hope and peace to the weary.

The Good Shepherd loves His sheep. The Good Shepherd calls the sheep by name. The Good Shepherd seeks out the lost and rejoices when His sheep are found. The Good Shepherd is willing to sacrifice everything, even His own life to save His sheep. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for his sheep.

Friends, we are the sheep Jesus loves! We are the sheep Jesus freely gave up his life for. We are the sheep invited to the pasture of God's mercy, grace, forgiveness, peace and unconditional love.

"See what love God has for us that we should be called children of God and that is what we are" (I John 3:1). We are God's beloved children. We are God's beloved sheep.

I came across a story this week about a real sheep named Chris. Christ was discovered in 2015 wondering the Australian countryside. When Chris was found, it was hard to tell what he or it was. What looked like a cloud that had fallen from the sky was actually one huge mass of dirty wool moving ever so slowly. It is believed Chris wandered away from his flock and had been fending for himself for 6 years in the wilderness. His wool was so long and heavy that if Chris had fallen over, he would have never been able to get back up on his own and would have surely died.

Rescuers knew Chris needed to be sheered, but with the wool so long and his skin stretched by its weight the sheering would not be easy. Sheering sheep usually only takes a few minutes, but Chris was a different matter. It took over 45 minutes to shear Chris's wool and relieve him of his burden. The wool weighed in at 89 pounds - a new

world record for wool sheered from a single sheep, crushing the former record by over 30 pounds. Chris's wool is now permanently on display at the National Museum of Australia.

The short documentary about Chris went on to say that sheep historically shed their wool naturally. However, sheep have been bred to retain their wool for the money.

In many ways we are not so different from Chris. We all have a tendency to nibble our way out of the pasture and find ourselves lost. Many feel lost and alone. We carry burdens, pains, difficulties, and sins that we are not able to remove on our own. Sin has caused us to retain our brokenness, pride, woundedness, addictions and shame. Like Chris we cannot shed the burdens we carry on our own.

By God's grace and the awareness of the one who found him, Chris was given new life - freed from the burden he carried, all 89 pounds of it. Can you imagine walking alone for years carrying that much excess burden? Maybe you can. We all have excess baggage, burdens, struggles, pain, guilt and shame that we carry around. We often try to hide it, but deep down we know. God knows too.

The Good News of the Good Shepherd is we are not alone. Jesus, our Good Shepherd knows the burdens we carry and knows how to free us from our struggles and excess baggage.

I am glad the burdens, sins, and struggles Jesus has sheered from my life are not found in a museum for all to see. Although, I wonder, if we were more vulnerable with our struggles and shared more freely with others the freedom and forgiveness we have found in Jesus, maybe it would help others come to know and trust God's love found in and through the Good Shepherd. Maybe it would help others recognize themselves as sheep and be willing to be found and healed by the Good Shepherd. Yet, have no fear, when God forgives He casts our sins away! When God sheers away our wounded souls he holds us in his peace.

The Good Shepherd, knows your name. The Good Shepherd knows your story. The Good Shepherd loves you beyond measure. The Good Shepherd not only laid down his life for you and me, but rose again that we might know the true depth of love God has for us.

Chris's life was saved and he had a faithful and dedicated shepherd watch over him.

How about you? Have you been found by the Good Shepherd? Have you opened your heart to the resurrection of Jesus and let the Good Shepherd shear away your sins, your burdens, the pains and wounds you carry?

The Good Shepherd says to each of us, “Come to me all who are weary and tired of carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest...learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls” (*Matthew 11:28,29*).

What a difference The Good Shepherd can make in your life and mine.

I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me.

God bless you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Deacon Steve

(Meet Chris: Before and After – What a difference a Good Shepherd can make!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2yzYC3Loe4>

