

The Good Shepherd

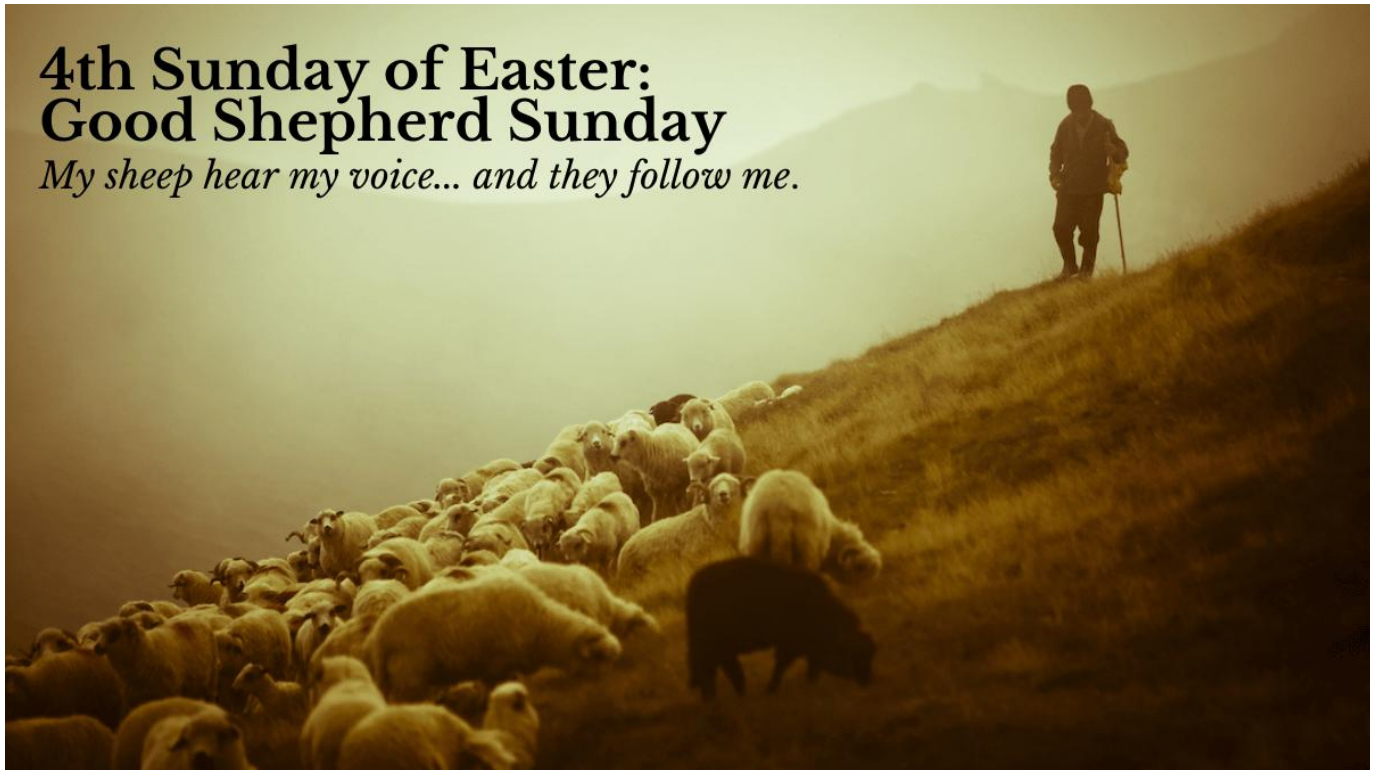


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²⁷ My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ The Father and I are one." (John 10:27-30)

Context

The pastoral imagery of John 10 is always a part of the readings for the 4th Sunday of Easter:

Year A - John 10:1-10 (sheepfold, gatekeeper, sheep recognizing the voice)

Year B - John 10:11-18 ("I am the good shepherd")

Year C - John 10:27-30

The pastoral images are part of a larger section that includes John 5:1-10:42. The principal feasts of the Jews provide an outline for this long section. Fr. Raymond Brown (*John, The Anchor Bible*) suggests:

- Jesus on the **Sabbath** (5:1-47)
- Jesus at **Passover** (6:1-71)
- Jesus at **Tabernacles** (7:1-8:59)
- Aftermath of Tabernacles (9:1-10:21)
- Jesus at **Dedication** (10:22-39)

It should be noted that there is the change of festivals at 10:22. The Feast of Dedication (or Hanukkah) is celebrated in the November/December time period about three months after the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths). Nonetheless, Jesus continues the shepherd/sheep image that began in John 10.

The feast of the Dedication was then taking place in Jerusalem. It was winter. And Jesus walked about in the temple area on the Portico of Solomon. (John 10:22-23)

The Feast of Dedication celebrates the liberation of Jerusalem from the reign of the Syrian (Seleucid) king Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus had defiled the Jerusalem Temple in 167 BCE by building an altar to his own gods within the Temple sanctuary (1 Macc 1:54-61), and in 165 BCE Judas Maccabeus and his brothers regained control of the Temple and rededicated it to the God of Israel (1 Macc 4:36-58). The eight-day feast takes place in the month of Chislev (December), as did the original rededication (1 Macc 4:56; 2 Macc 10:1-8) and is marked by the lighting of lamps and rejoicing (1 Macc 4:59; 2 Macc 1:8-9, 18).

The Feast of Dedication was not a pilgrimage feast and so could be celebrated away from Jerusalem. Its mention in v.22, then, does not give a reason for Jesus' presence in Jerusalem (cf. 7:1-10). Instead, its mention here, along with the realistic notation about winter, draws attention to the passing of time since the Feast of Tabernacles and Jesus' continuing presence in Jerusalem. The reference to Solomon's portico (v.23) adds a realistic detail to the picture, because the area of the Temple so known was located on the eastern side of the Temple and so would have been the most protected area of the Temple precincts in winter. [O'Day, *John*, New Interpreters Bible, pp. 675-676]

This week's passage is succinct and calls to mind the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (cf. John 10:11) – as it is meant to do. The gospel establishes a certain cluster of associations around the word shepherd (*poimen*.) Each time the image reappears it evokes and develops the associations found elsewhere in the narrative. John 10:1-5 introduces the image of the shepherd by describing how a shepherd enters the sheepfold, calls the sheep by name, and leads them out to pasture. In 10:7-18 Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep. In 10:22-30 he adds that no one will snatch the sheep out of his hand. At the conclusion of the Gospel, Jesus enjoins Peter to “*feed my lambs.... Tend my sheep.... Feed my sheep*” (21:15-17). The emphatic use of the shepherd imagery suggests that Peter's task must be understood in light of what Jesus said earlier in the Gospel about what it means to be a shepherd. Jesus makes a prophetic statement that reinforces the connection by anticipating that Peter, like Jesus the good shepherd, would lay down his life (21:18-19).

One should also note that all of the shepherding imagery follows the narrative of Jesus' healing of the Man Born Blind. While worthy of further development, for our purposes here, let us simply say that John's theological intent is to show the religious leaders as blind shepherds in their failure to recognize the healing light that is Jesus

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Crucial to the identification of the author's purpose at this point is the necessary realization that he is writing about Jesus with the text of Ezekiel 34 in clear view. (*Note: it would be good to pause at this point and read Ezekiel 34*) In that passage, Ezekiel, speaking God's word, rebukes and condemns the authorities of his own time. They had become irresponsible and thieving shepherds, feeding themselves rather than their flock. So God would take away their position and authority and become the shepherd himself. Finally he would appoint another shepherd after the figure of David. John sees all of this coming true in Jesus. God has become the shepherd in Jesus, himself Messiah and Son of David. Jesus' fidelity to his sheep, his sacrifice for them, stands out in contrast to the failure of the stumbling, blinded, bullying authorities in John 9.

Metaphors come fast and often in John 10. There are the sheep — easily identified as the flock that Jesus intends to lead into good pasture (v. 9), those whom he knows by name and who recognize his voice (vv. 3-4, 14), those whom he intends to defend against thieves and robbers (vv. 1, 8, 10) and whom he wishes to join together with all others who, listening to his voice, will come into the one fold (v. 16). Jesus will effect all this because he is the Good Shepherd (vv. 11, 14), loved by the Father because he will lay down his life for the sheep. It is this act of total, loving self-sacrifice that is mentioned again and again as the central motif. Appearing first in verse 11 as the good shepherd title is introduced; it occurs again in verses 15, 17, and twice in verse 18. Though the shepherd-sheep metaphor was well known in the Old Testament

Scriptures (as in Ezek 34), this laying down of the shepherd's life is something new. It is the characteristic function of Jesus. He is the good shepherd, especially because of his willing self-sacrifice.

Commentary

A key element of our Sunday gospel passage is an indication of who is part of the flock of believers. The people know Jesus and they, like folks in every age, want straight answers:

²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." ²⁵ Jesus answered them, "I told you and you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify to me. ²⁶ But you do not believe, because you are not among my sheep." (John 10:24-26)

Literally, the question asked in v.24 is, "How long will you take away our life (*psyche*)?" O'Day [676] writes about this phrase:

Even though both the NIV and NRSV translate the phrase as "keep us in suspense," there is little evidence of the idiom's use with that meaning in other literature. In modern Greek, the idiom means, "How long will you continue to annoy us?" and there are ancient examples of that meaning of the idiom as well. Because the idiom is difficult to translate precisely, scholars are divided on whether the question expresses suspense and a genuine desire to have the issue resolved or irritation and hostility. Since the idiom follows on the heels of John 8-9, irritation seems more likely.

Throughout chapters 5-9 Jesus has been incurring the wrath of "the Jews."

- They seek to kill him for making himself equal to God (5:18).
- They are looking for an opportunity to kill him (7:1).
- They attempt to stone him (8:59).
- They attempt to stone him again (10:31) because he blasphemes, making himself God.

It would seem that Jesus is more than just a mild irritant if they repeatedly want to kill him. And yet they want some resolution. They want to be told plainly.

This verse is the only place in the gospel where Jesus is asked directly if he is the Messiah (*christos*). Prior to this, Jesus has not claimed this title for himself, although others have given it to him.

- John the Baptist has claimed not to be the Messiah (1:20, 25; 3:28).
- Andrew tells Simon, "We have found the Messiah" (1:41)
- The Samaritan woman confesses that she knows the Messiah is coming and she tells the townspeople about Jesus: "Could he possibly be the Messiah?" (4:29)
- The people of Jerusalem have a discussion about whether or not Jesus might be the Messiah (7:26, 27, 31, 41, 42). A main issue is whether or not the Messiah would come from Galilee.
- The blind man's parents will not answer the authorities "because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue" (9:22).

Official Judaism seems to have already determined that Jesus must not be the Messiah and anyone believing otherwise would be punished. If Jesus had answered, "Yes, I am the Messiah," my guess is that the questioners would not have believed him. They really didn't want an answer to their question that was different than what they had already decided. Jesus was not the Messiah. But with a clear answer, formal charges of blasphemy could be referred based on Jesus' own testimony.

Coming to believe and follow Jesus as Messiah is the very aim and intent of John's gospel: "But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name." (John 20:31) The only question that lingers is: "Do you hear the voice of the shepherd and count yourself as one of the sheep?"

Jesus Knows – Do We Follow?

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father's hand.

John makes a connection between the sheep who hear the voice of Jesus and believing. Brian Stoffregen notes that Jesus makes the following statements about his sheep in John 10:27-29 (in a more literal translation of the Greek)

- My sheep are listening to my voice.
- I am knowing them
- They (the sheep) are following me
- I am giving them eternal life.
- They will not perish for eternity.
- No one will snatch them from my hand
- My father has given [them] to me [the word "them" is implied and not stated]
- The middle of v.29 is difficult to translate and can be rendered "My father is greater than all things", or "what my father has given is greater than all things." In other words, is the context taken to be God or what God has given Jesus. Almost all translators opt for the first meaning as the affirmation of God's greatness seems more appropriate.
- No one is able to snatch from the hand of the father

Listening and Knowing. There are numerous shades of meaning to "knowing" (*ginosko*) from no direct personal involvement in what/who is known, e.g., "to know about" someone to knowledge gained through an ongoing direct personal relationship with the person. In contrast to the question, "Do you know the Lord?", the issue in this verse is Jesus' knowledge of us. Frequently John talks about Jesus' knowledge (*ginosko*) of people:

- he knows Nathanael (1:48)
- he knows all people and what's in them (2:24-25)
- he knows what the Pharisees have heard (4:1)
- he knows that the ill man has been at the pool for many years (5:6)
- he knows that "the Jews" do not have the love of God in them (5:42)
- he knows that the crowd is about to come and make him king (6:15)
- he knows the Father (8:55; 10:15; 17:25)
- he knows his own [sheep] (10:14, 27)
- he knows what his disciples want to ask him (16:19)

With this word (*ginosko*) and with a synonymous word (*oida*, e.g., knowing the betrayer, 13:11), John indicates that Jesus (supernaturally) knows what is in people, but this may not necessarily indicate the close, personal relationship that can be implied by this word, which is meant when it is used in reference to "knowing" his own sheep (see also 10:4-5 where *oida* is used concerning the sheep "knowing" the shepherd's voice).

Both of these words are used in last week's text: Does Jesus know (*oida* 21:15, 16, *ginosko* v. 17) that Peter loves him, as Peter declares? Does Jesus know (*oida* 21:17) everything as Peter declares? If so, what

is our response to this knowledge that Jesus has about us? Perhaps it is easier to think about not believing that Jesus knows us, then we would believe that we can keep our evil deeds hidden in the dark (3:19-20). Perhaps like the question to Peter, they are not asked for the benefit of Jesus' knowledge (who already knows the truth), but so that we may know the answer within us.

Being Given. In v.29 it is clear that it is the Father who has given the sheep to Jesus. This small part of one verse, when reflected upon can be a quite challenging revelation. We are part of Jesus' flock because of what God has done, not because of anything we have done, (cf. "You did not choose me but I chose you" 15:16a). Can we refuse to be God's gift to Jesus? Jesus is clear that "the Jews" to whom he is speaking do not belong to his sheep. Why not? Clearly they have heard Jesus words – yet they refuse to listen and follow. What is the word they refuse to hear? It simply this: "God has given you to Jesus."

It is the mission of the church to proclaim over and over again to its people: "You have been chosen by God. You are part of Jesus' flock. You belong to Jesus. You are a sheep of God." The hearers can choose to believe or not believe these words. The hearers can choose to follow up on what God has done for them or not. Based upon those choices, now and in the end of all things Jesus will say (or not say): "*I know them and they follow me*" (v.27)

Can We Follow? The Father who gives us to Jesus is greater than any other power. There is nothing that can snatch us away from Jesus or from the Father. "*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 8:38-39). If salvation (i.e., belonging to Jesus' sheep, being part of the family, and thus being given eternal life by Jesus) is dependent upon God and Jesus; then it is not dependent upon my faith or my love or my knowledge – all of which can be somewhat unstable. Salvation is rooted in the Word of God which proclaims: "You have been chosen by God. You are part of Jesus' flock. You belong to Jesus. You are a sheep of God." The hearers can choose to believe or not believe these words. The hearers can choose to follow up on what God has done for them or not. "*For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother*" (Matthew 12:50). The implication of "being given" and "hearing" is to discern and do the will of the God who has already given you to Jesus.

The Oneness Of Jesus And The Father

The Oneness of Jesus and the Father are at the heart of our Christian confession – there is a unique relationship between Jesus and the Father (and the Holy Spirit). That oneness is expressed in Scripture as a oneness of nature, of will, of knowledge, and many things, all the while being a distinct *persona*. Some Christians point to v.30 (*The Father and I are one.*) are a simple proof text of the uniquely Christian confession. While this verse is part of the confession, this verse is actually quite limited in what it claims.

In Greek the word "one" has masculine, feminine, and neuter forms. In v.30 the neuter form (*hen*) is used so that Jesus is not saying that he and God are one person, nor even of one nature or essence. Rather, he is saying that he and God are *united* in the work that they do. It is impossible to distinguish Jesus' work from God's work, because Jesus shares fully in God's work. John 10:30 presents in summary form what Jesus said at length about his relationship with God in 5:17, 19-30. God gives life; Jesus gives life (5:21; 10:28). God judges; Jesus judges (5:22; 9:39).

The question for us is whether are we one (*hen*) with Jesus? Are we united with Jesus in the work we do in the world so that we are witness to the wholeness of God's salvific plan already in action?

O'Day (*John*, New Interpreter's Bible, p.679) offers these reflections on this verse.

The most important difference between the discussion of the early church fathers and the Fourth Evangelist about the relationship of God and Jesus is that the church fathers were developing doctrine and the Fourth Evangelist was telling a story. This does not mean that the

Fourth Evangelist's reflections are inherently any less theological, but because they are cast in a story, they have a very different theological intent.... When Jesus says, "I and the Father are one," it does not come as any surprise to the Gospel reader, because that reality has been acted out throughout the Gospel narrative. Jesus has done the works of God, spoken the words of God, identified himself with the I AM of God. The relationship of God and Jesus is not a metaphysical puzzle for the Fourth Evangelist, but evidence of God's love for the world (3:16-17). The wonder of the incarnation is that God is palpably available to the world in the person of Jesus, that those who believe in Jesus, who see the works of God in Jesus, have access to God in ways never before possible (14:7-11)....

One non-negotiable point that John and the early framers of doctrine have in common, however, is that Jesus' relationship to God is the crux and stumbling block of Christian faith. For the Fourth Evangelist, that relationship is the dividing line between Jews and Christians, and hence is the focal point of most of the controversy between Jesus and the religious authorities. For the second-, third-, and fourth-century theologians, it was the dividing line between orthodoxy and heresy. For contemporary Christians, it is the source of Christians' distinctive religious identity in their conversations with one another and with people of different religious faiths.

Notes

10:27 *My sheep*: The references to those who are and are not Jesus' "sheep" in 10:26–29 build on the Good Shepherd Discourse in 10:1–21. The metaphor of the "flock," an everyday feature of Jewish life, pervades the OT. God himself was known as Israel's Shepherd (e.g., Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Ps. 23:1; 28:9; 77:20; 78:52; 80:1; Isa. 40:11; Jer. 31:9; Ezek. 34:11–31), and his people are the "sheep of his pasture" (e.g., Ps. 74:1; 78:52; 79:13; 95:7; 100:3; Ezek. 34:31). Part of this imagery was also the notion of chief shepherd and assistant shepherds and of hired hands. David, who was a shepherd before he became king, became a prototype of God's shepherd. Jesus saw himself as embodying the characteristics and expectations attached to this salvation-historical biblical figure as the Good Shepherd par excellence.

10:28 *eternal life*: The gift of eternal life is depicted in several ways in this Gospel. It is (1) like water for the thirsty (4:14; 7:37–38); (2) something experienced now, culminating in the resurrection on the last day (5:24–26); (3) like bread for the hungry (6:27); and (4) a relationship with the living God (17:3).

10:29 *My Father...is greater than all*: The textual evidence for the first clause is very divided; it may also be translated: "As for the Father, what he has given me is greater than all," or "My Father is greater than all, in what he has given me."

10:30 *The Father and I are one*: This is justification for John 10:29; it asserts unity of power and reveals that the words and deeds of Jesus are the words and deeds of God. John does not use the masculine form of the adjective 'one' (*heis*), which would suggest that Father and Son are one person. Instead, he uses the neuter form (*hen*), suggesting that the oneness of Father and Son spoken of here is oneness in mission and purpose. Father and Son are at one in their commitment to prevent anyone from snatching believers out of their hands. Here the nature of oneness is functional; later in the Gospel it involves unity of being (17:21–23).

Sources

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