

August 5, 2018

"He who has ears, let him hear..."

"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice..." John 10:1-6

A parable is a story based on a common experience which is then used to teach a behavioral lesson. Jesus, among other great teachers, uses parables to teach the people lessons about their actions and attitudes. All of the gospel accounts contain the parables of Jesus except for John's gospel. His gospel only includes the three parables found in chapter ten in which Jesus defines himself.

So, who does Jesus say that he is? He begins with a word picture of a common practice. Nearly every member of his audience would recognize the basis of these stories. Since most of us don't live around sheep we don't see the picture as clearly as those in Jesus' day would have.

In every community in the first century there was a communal sheep pen. During the winter months the shepherds would bring their sheep into town and lead them into the sheep pen or fold with all of the other sheep from local flocks. The sheep fold was protected through the night by a night watchman hired by the community.



In the morning the shepherds would gather at the sheep fold to lead their sheep out to pasture. Each shepherd in turn would kneel in the gate and call his sheep by name and with his own unique call. He would hold his staff across the opening allowing only one sheep out at a time and requiring them to jump over his staff. That way the shepherd could check them for injuries of other issues before leaving the fold.

Once all of his sheep are out of the fold the shepherd would repeat his unique call and his sheep which might well have mixed with other flocks milling around in the area would hear that call and follow their shepherd. He would simply walk out ahead of them and they would follow him wherever he might take them.

Unlike modern sheep management methods, these sheep had literally been born on their shepherds knees. The first face they saw and the first voice they heard was his and like most animals they would fix on that face and that voice. For the rest of their lives they would only follow that shepherd and would only respond to that voice.

Then Jesus says, ***"I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."*** (John 10:7-10)

In this part of his parable Jesus likens himself to the gate of the sheep fold. There is only one gate; only one way in and one way out. Often these folds were built in steep-walled canyons near town so that the natural cliff walls would keep the sheep in and everything and everyone else out. The only way into these folds was through the protected gate.

Jesus wants us to understand, as he tells his Apostles later in John's gospel, ***"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*** (John 14:6) As

we understood from our last series, the only way for us to find salvation is through the grace of God poured out for us through Jesus. We cannot enter into heaven any other way.

Finally Jesus will say, "***I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.***" (John 10 14-16) Before David went out to do battle with the giant, he told the King that he has killed a lion and a bear as part of his duties as his families shepherd. Each family depended on their sheep for their wellbeing and so those sheep were extraordinarily valuable. The shepherds, often teen boys and girls, were expected to protect their sheep at all costs.

Jesus is, he says, "***...the good shepherd...***" He knows his sheep and his sheep know him. They know his voice and they will follow him wherever he might lead them. They trust him completely because they know he will, in fact he has already, laid down his life for them.

Jesus offers to become our good shepherd. We can place our absolute trust in him because he has already demonstrated his willingness to lay down his life for us. If we hear his voice and follow his call, he will lead us through this life perfectly. The choice to hear his voice, and the choice to follow his call is, and always will be, ours alone. What will we choose?

