

“Beyond the Fold” based on John 10:11-21 and Psalm 23

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on April 21, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Now, I don't know about you, but I don't have a lot of experience herding actual sheep. Despite even having worked in Agricultural policy, most of what I know, or what I think I know, comes from sermons and commentaries. These are all most likely written by people who have never stood in a field with a staff, supervising dozens or hundreds of wool covered beasts eating grass.

However, if you're on social media, you may have seen one shepherd practice that has gone viral recently. It allegedly speaks to the meaning of Psalm 23's fifth verse, where it says the Lord, “anoints my head with oil.”

As the explanation goes, when flies and other parasites, as well as briars, dig in a sheep's head, a shepherd will take oil, which can have antibacterial properties, and pour it on. This saturates the animal's head to help heal the wounds, repel the flies and parasites, while lubricating the wool to allow any briars to be removed. Now, I could not find anything not written by a pastor or some other person with a religious agenda giving this explanation. Yet, it rings true with Psalm 23 as pointing to healing and not kingship as the reason for the anointing.

In the text itself, that makes sense, since the Hebrew word translated as anoint is “*dawshane*,” which literally means “make fat,” and occurs a total of 11 times in the Old Testament. It is only in Psalm 23 where the translators use the word “anoint.” In every other instance it is used as a metaphor for becoming prosperous, as in made larger, or in the use of oil to clean, particularly to clean up ashes. So, it makes sense, regardless of shepherding practices, that this is what David is referring to and not his own anointing as king. It is about God's cleansing, healing, and restoration.

Another one of those truisms that I hear in sermon after sermon is the status of shepherds. Time and time again biblical scholars and pastors have trotted out the idea of the “outcast shepherd.” They say that in the time of Jesus, shepherds were despised.

Of course, as I often find with most sexist, classist, and supremacist biblical interpretation, the source of this error is not rooted in the bible or Hebrew teaching, but the writings of Aristotle. Yep, the same Greek pagan philosopher who said, that women were just incomplete men and that certain nations or people groups are meant to rule over, even enslave, other people groups for eternity, is also the source of this idea that people hated shepherds.

I won't get into it now, but I am always amused how many times I find Aristotle comes up in interpretations of scripture which have been used to divide people. He gained a reputation as a prophet practically in both Christianity and Judaism in the middle ages, despite being a polytheist who lived 300 years before Jesus.

But getting back to the topic at hand, Aristotle had little or no contact with people of Judea, let alone knowledge of what they thought of shepherds several centuries after he died. Perhaps the Greeks did hate shepherds, but there is no reason to think, that the Jews did. So, when Jesus says that he is the “good shepherd,” he is making a contrast between shepherds in general and himself. So, while there is some comparison going on here, it is not that shepherds are “bad” and he happens to be a “good one.” Now, it's the difference between an actual shepherd, who owns the flock and loves the flock, versus the hired hand, who fills in for the shepherd and has no love for the sheep.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, are among the most familiar words in scripture. It seems hard to believe that a people whose faith was handed down by shepherds – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all shepherds, Moses was a shepherd, David was a shepherd – would just hate shepherds in general. What's more, unlike Greek culture, in the Ancient Near East, it was common for a king to be called a shepherd – in Persia, Babylon, Assyria – because they are charged with the care of his people in his nation or fold.

I think it is reasonable then to say that when Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," he is pointing back to this idea of a good king – one who cares for his nation. Jesus is then pointing to those leaders who will not receive him as being the "hired hands." These words here are all part of a series of events in John's gospel, which started back in Chapter 8 when Jesus goes to the temple.

There, he makes a series of statements that almost get him stoned. He tells the people they will die in their sins unless they believe that, quote, "I am." It's usually translated, "I am he," but it's just the words, "I am." They don't realize he's talking about God, so he says that when the Son of Man is lifted up by them then they will know, again, "I am."

Eventually, after Jesus tells them that for lying. They are not acting like children of Abraham. And so these particular opponents then must be children of the devil, or divider. They retort back that Jesus is a Samaritan – not really a true Judean – and that he has a demon, or a minor deity or evil spirit, in him. They say the proof of this is Jesus's claim that all who keep his word shall not taste death in the age to come. They say that even Abraham died, and now they don't miss the point when Jesus responds, "Before Abraham was, I am." At this point they finally realize that what he has been saying all along is the name of God, "I am who I am."

This is the backdrop for what we read today in John's gospel. Jesus slips away and has avoided being stoned in anger by a reactionary mob. Now he comes upon a blind man and heals him. This type of miracle is foretold in prophecy of the Messiah, but it is one that is never recorded among the Old Testament scriptures. And so, they keep asking and asking the man to verify his story. Eventually, they decide not to allow the man into community. They cast him out, or throw him out, after which he finds Jesus.

When we finally get to the passage today, Jesus makes a startling revelation – He is not just there for people welcomed into the fold of the Sadducees and Pharisees, of the Judean leaders who control access to synagogues and the temples. It's true that there are those in that fold who will hear his voice and recognize him as their king, their good shepherd – the true king and the Lord God who David said is his shepherd.

But at the same time there are many folds, and people from those other folds will hear his voice and also recognize him as their king, the Lord their God. Yet, there is only one flock, made up of people from these many folds. Jesus always goes beyond the fold we are in and even in the places we might not expect. There is Jesus calling and his sheep respond to him.

There's an old joke about someone getting to heaven and getting directions. A woman arrives at the gates of heaven. Peter asks, "What's your denomination?" The woman says, "Methodist." Peter says, "Go to Room 24, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8." A man arrives at the gates of heaven so Peter asks, "Denomination?" "Lutheran." He responds. "Go to Room 18, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8."

A third person, another woman, arrives at the gates. Peter asks for a denomination. She says, "Presbyterian." And Peter says, "Go to Room 11, but be very quiet when you pass Room 8." And as we are always decent and in order, she asks why she has to be quiet in passing Room 8. Peter responds, "Well, the Roman Catholics are in Room 8, and they think they're the only ones here."

I know I've heard that more around here with Southern Baptist, but I figured I'd stay true to my roots and pick on myself. I'm sure you've heard the joke before, but here's the point: Whatever fold we are in – whatever human category, be it our denomination, our political party, our gender, our language, our race, our identity of any kind – Jesus's voice is heard by many. And what's more, his voice is heard not only among our fold, but in folds we think are in opposition to us. C.S. Lewis even went so far in "The Last Battle," the final book of the Chronicles of Narnia, to frame how someone even in another religion might actually be responding to the shepherd's voice, even if they don't even know it.

As with last week's sermon, the point here is not to be relativistic. It's not to say that there is no truth or that all paths lead to the same thing. It is not to say that it's all fine and what is right or wrong is just relative to the person in any given time or place. Absolutely not.

The point is exactly the opposite. The point is that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. If we trust this and listen for his voice, we will find Jesus as our shepherd. This doesn't mean we hear a booming audible voice that overwhelms us, but when we recognize that love and self-sacrifice, a laying down of our life to put others first is what it means to truly be Christ like.

For us, this may not mean the heroic act of laying down our actual life to save another's life. It's the everyday response we give this command, when we set aside our own interests. It may be seen when we lay down our need to be right in order to preserve a relationship, It may be to lay down our identity in one fold or another when working with or alongside someone in a different fold. It may mean committing to be a faithful presence in the world around us, loving as Christ loves, so that others know just how much they are loved by God as well.

We try to save face in many ways in our culture. Sometimes we do it by hiding our faith for fear of being embarrassed among nonbelievers. Sometimes we do it by promoting our faith in order to get credit among those who claim faith. It depends on the circle we are in. But the fact is that we need to discern when it is that we are truly honoring God, sharing God's love, and laying down what we hold most dear, so that we might pick it up again. We pick it up not of our own accord, but receiving it back from our Good Shepherd, Christ our King.

Beloved, when Jesus said he lays down his life, he is not just talking about the cross. Indeed, John's gospel theology holds up the ascension as the pinnacle of Christ's work. In Jesus, the eternal Son of God lays down his life just by becoming human initially, by the Word becoming flesh and pitching its tent among us. The Word of God, fully God, lived in your flesh and mine among us as fully Human, even to the point of suffering and death on the Roman cross. But he rose again, and ascended, so that the Holy Spirit could be sent to empower us to share in Christ's work to love as he loves us.

Beloved, like the King David acknowledged a Shepherd King, the true King, as higher than him, so too, our job as is to lead with conviction and love those we meet as we follow Christ. But it is important to remember we follow Christ. We don't get people to follow us. Those we reach may not see things exactly the way we do, but that does not make them any less human or loved by God

than we are. We make Jesus very small when we think he likes the people we like and dislikes the people we dislike. Jesus is so much bigger, and he goes beyond the fold, because the Word in our flesh is the ultimate truth we hold close. We trust in him with faith, hope, and love.

Beloved, you are loved by Christ, and you are the sheep of his own flock. From this fold we go out and we share his love. May we recognize Christ at work in all the folds around us, and love as he loves so that all might hear his voice. Amen.