

*It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.*

**Weekly Edition – June 1, 2018**  
**Gospel According to St. John – Third Year**

## The Good Shepherd and His Sheep

**10** “Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

<sup>7</sup>Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

<sup>11</sup>“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. <sup>13</sup>The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

<sup>14</sup>“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—<sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. <sup>17</sup>The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

<sup>19</sup>The Jews who heard these words were again divided. <sup>20</sup>Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?”

<sup>21</sup>But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

### Entering Into Scripture: A Meditation on The Good Shepherd

*“Amen. Amen, I say to you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a*

*robber.” It is Jesus speaking. I wish He would be a little more prudent. He has called out the Pharisees. They somehow fail to notice He is*

#### The Gospel of St. John

##### Part I

- Prologue 1:1-14
- First Year 1:15 – 2:22
- Second Year 2:23 – 6:71
- Third Year 7:1 – 12:50

##### Part II

- The Last Discourse 13:1 – 17:26
- The Arrest and Trial 18:1 – 19:16
- Death and Resurrection 19:16 (b) – 21:25

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speaking about them. But that's what I understand. As a fisherman, I don't know much about shepherding. Only what I have observed over the years.

There are two very different kinds of sheep pens. Around the towns and cities, extending from the outer walls, are the kind that Jesus seems to be referring to now. These pens are rock-wall enclosures with strong, heavy wooden doors, each fitted with a lock. A gatekeeper has charge over these pens and is the keeper of the key. During the day, the door is open, but at night, once all the sheep are in and counted, the door is locked. In the morning, the gatekeeper unlocks the door, and the shepherds lead their herds back out to graze.

But in the warm season, when the sheep are out grazing on the hills and don't return to town at night, there is a different kind of sheep pen. These are large circular or rectangular enclosures made by stacking field rocks. The better ones are about chest high and are topped off with a defensive trim of thorns and briars to discourage predators. Only a narrow opening in the wall allows passage into and out of this type of sheep pen which has no door. The shepherd himself will become the door, so to speak, by laying across this opening at night. Nothing can get in or get out without literally stepping over him, that is except for predators, who will attempt to climb over the defensive walls.

My thoughts are interrupted as Jesus continues, "The one who enters by the gate is the Shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for Him, and the sheep listen to His voice." Again, my mind wanders off as I think about sheep. They are not like horses. A well-trained horse will respond to any voice – especially when offered a cluster of ripe grapes. But not sheep. They know the voice of their own shepherd and listen to that voice alone. Nothing can induce a sheep to ignore its master's voice except a sheep's own stubbornness.

Gathering my attention, I listen as Jesus speaks. "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. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." I realize Jesus is speaking of Himself.

I flash back to a time last year when we were with Jesus out on the plains. Three shepherds approached from different parts and warmly greeted one another. They must have been friends. As the men spoke, the sheep melded into a single large herd. Yet when the men parted ways, each called out and the single mass dissolved into three herds – each sheep following his own shepherd.

Sheep are entirely defenseless creatures. Sheep are prey and their only defense is to flee. They have no way to ward off robbers or defend themselves against predators. They use their natural herding instinct to band together for safety. They are nearly entirely dependent upon their shepherd to protect them. Sheep tracks are never straight for this reason. By walking a winding trail, sheep can observe what's behind them first with one eye, then the other. So when the shepherd opens the gate and goes on ahead, the sheep follow without hesitation.

I looked around at the Pharisees. I could tell they did not understand Jesus was talking about them. I must confess I took a secret joy in that thought.

Jesus continued teaching. "Amen, Amen, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through Me will be saved. They 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."

I picture Jesus as a shepherd. In my mind's eye I see Him out on the hills. The first image that flashes through my mind is Jesus gathering in the sheep at day's end. His rod is placed over the open doorway to the sheep fold. The sheep pass

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under His rod one at a time as they enter the safe enclosure. He counts them and greets each one by name – names given by their distinctive features – fat ears, or brown eye. Then a second image: Jesus lays down across the entrance to sleep.

I think about His choice of words. Jesus said His sheep will “go in and go out.” It is a phrase of comfort to us Jews. Only a free people can come in and go out. That is not possible for a city under siege, or for a people threatened by hostile neighbors. To be able to come and go unmolested is a way of describing a life without fear – a life of security and peace. I have felt this way since leaving my nets a few years back to follow Jesus. Frankly, the only thing that gives me anxiety are these Pharisees.

I take notice of the crowd around me. A hushed stillness settles on the courtyard where Jesus speaks. There is a crisp freshness in the air – the air is moist and sweet – like after a winter rain that settles the dust and causes the trees to stand a little more erect. I become aware of just how precious this moment is, and I am grateful to be here right now. And my senses seem to drink in a bigger gulp of life.

Jesus pauses, as if for good effect. Then He continues, saying: “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the Shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.” The crowd is mesmerized by His teaching, as am I.

Once again, my mind wanders off into the Judean hillside. I picture a shepherd, alone with his sheep. He sees them cluster together into a closely compacted band – his first indication there is danger nearby. He looks in the direction of their gaze. Predators come in many forms: coyotes, wolves, foxes, bears, dogs, eagles, bobcats, and more. There, some 1200 yards away, he sees the cause of alarm. A lion. The

shepherd moves quickly to position himself between the threat and his sheep. He gathers up a few small stones and places the first in his sling. He begins to twirl the sling, slowly at first as he moves into position – closing ground on the lion. Now the sling whirls. He takes aim and flicks his wrist. With deadly velocity the stone launches, sinking into the lion's head with a cracking thud. The startled lion jumps back, turns and flees over the hill. Menace repelled. I consider the bravery and courage of those faithful shepherds, how they risk their lives for their sheep.

Then a different picture. A wolf. Large. Threatening. It attacks the flock and the sheep scatter. The wolf eyes an ewe and chases it, taking it down by the throat as it cries out in desperation. Then silence. Dead. The shepherd, nowhere to be found. When he spotted the wolf, he fled. The hired hand won't put his life on the line for the sheep.

I hear His voice again, and once again my thoughts come back to Jesus. “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. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to My voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves Me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from My Father.”

I have heard stories about shepherds who have died protecting their sheep. Some have been mauled by wild beasts, but that doesn't happen very often. Shepherds are great warriors. Their instruments are simple, but effective. They have three primary tools. The sling in skilled hands is a precision tool. It can kill a predator from great distances. It can also be used to get a sheep's attention. An experienced shepherd can land a rock just before a straying sheep's nose to get it to turn back. The rod is a two -to -four-foot club used for defense – but it is no match to a robber's

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sword. The staff has a crook on one end. It is placed around an ewe's neck to hold them in place during sheering. It is also used for correction or re-direction. The most dangerous predators are other men. Thieves and robbers. And these will not hesitate to kill a shepherd to steal the sheep.

These are the things I am thinking as Jesus says "I lay down My life – only to take it up again..." I try to fit what He says into a mental picture, but I come up blank. What does He mean when He says He will "lay down His life and take it up again?"

Apparently, I am not alone. An argument breaks out among the Pharisees. Some say Jesus is a demon-possessed whack-job, and we would all do well to keep our distance from Him. But others ask if these are the sayings of a mad-man. "Besides," one objects, "Can a demon open the eyes of a blind man?"

Immediately, I am transported back three months ago to the last time we were here in Jerusalem. Jesus healed a man born blind on the Sabbath. He created quite a ruckus. The

Pharisees were bitterly divided. Moreover, He told the Pharisees that since they claimed to be able to see, they were the sinners. Now all that comes rushing back as Pharisee squares off against Pharisee in heated debate.

And I try to block out their words and their vitriol as I trace back over what Jesus has said. And I wish I could meet His Father, who I believe is God, and who Jesus speaks about all the time. And I think about myself as being a sheep – and all the implications. Like when a sheep just lays down and refuses to budge – how a Good Shepherd will strike it with his rod to prod it back to its feet. Or how sheep will refuse to show pain to avoid looking vulnerable to prey. Or how sheep are quite absent-minded as they graze, unaware of the risks they face by separating from the herd. These things I mull over in my thoughts as I ponder the wonder of His words.

I look back, but Jesus is gone. He walked away without me noticing. I am left there with a dwindling crowd. The Pharisees are still at each other's throats – He is a Prophet, no He is a demon. I collect myself and turn to leave the Temple, still holding these things in my mind.

## Reflection 6: My Name

"He calls His own sheep by name." We seldom stop to think about the power of a name. Yet the first thing You invited Adam to do was to name the various things You made in creation. You invited him into a co-creative process with You. Jacob lived most of his life operating under the label "deceiver" – the meaning of his name, that is until he wrestled with You. You gave him a new name – "Israel." It means "wrestle with God." Only after Jacob had wrestled with You was he able to stop pretending to be someone he wasn't. Not until he wrestled with You was Jacob able to become the patriarch of the family

of God that would one day become the host family in Your incarnation. Like Jacob, we all labor under false names and accept, grudgingly or not, the labels we are given by others. But You know me by my real name. And my authentic identity is in the name You call me by – a name that is hidden from me until I wrestle it out with You. You free us from the need of pretending to be something we are not. I cannot discover my true identity until I have the courage to stand before You and allow You to strip away all the masks and pre-tenses I use to hide my nakedness from You and all those around me.

**Application:** *Have I discovered my authentic self in Jesus Christ? Are there roles or identities in my life that I use to hide my nakedness?*

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### Reflection 7: Contrasting Energies

Lord Jesus, You present Yourself to us as the Good Shepherd. You contrast Yourself with shepherds that are not good. The mercenary shepherd is not motivated by love; instead when these shepherds see trouble they flee. Hence the wolf seizes and scatters the sheep. It is a picture of fear and panic and chaos. It is the opposite of the portrait of unitive love found in You, the Good Shepherd. Instead, Your unifying love is shown in these three ways: First, Your complete generosity born of unconditional love for Your sheep. This is further expanded by the abrupt reference to dying – that You love Your

sheep so completely that You will lay down Your life for us. Secondly by Your intimate familiarity with each of us – You know each sheep intimately and personally, and each of Your own know You. Finally, by the broadening scope of Your divine action – sheep from a different fold, that is, the invitation of non-Jews into Your family. Your complete and limitless loving care for each of us is juxtaposed against the money-loving shepherd who has no bond with the sheep because he does not care. Hence the thief comes to steal and destroy – but You give us life – life to the fullest.

*Application: The energies of the contrasting shepherds is shown to be in the end result – on the one hand division and scattering, and on the other, peace, security and unity. How do I discern the dominate spiritual energy that is operating in my life right now?*

### Reflection 8: Intimate, Personal Knowledge

You paint a portrait of an intimate, personal knowledge that is mutual – You know Your sheep and Your sheep know You and listen to Your voice. Lord Jesus, You are not some far-off, remote and distant God – You a very personal, close and intimate God. You desire nothing less of us than complete intimate union with You in love. You draw us into relationship with You. The Psalmist speaks of Your intimacy with me, saying, “*You have searched me, Lord, and You know me...You created my inmost being.*” I am known completely and thoroughly by You. And Jeremiah speaks of our intimate familiarity with

You when he writes: “*But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,*” says the Lord.” You do not hide from us, but rather make Yourself and Your ways known to those who love You. Hence You are both Shepherd and Gate. As Shepherd You draw us into loving union with Yourself and with one another. As Gate You open the way to each of us to know Your Father and to call the Father “Abba” – Daddy.

*Application: How does the Lord reveal Himself and His ways to me?*

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### Reflection 9: The Victory of Death

*"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me."* Death is the great leveler – we are all terminal, in this sense. Each of us will die. The evil we fear in death is that in a life rich with failure and disappointments, death is my final failure – the final expression of my absolute powerlessness. But You do not see death this way at all. Instead, when You speak about death the context is of death being the fullest expression of Your love. You lay down Your life in death only to take it up again. This is because the Father loves You. Far from death making a mockery of life and love and freedom, death

becomes the highpoint of creative love in action. Rather in Your death the Father's love is expressed in a special way – in a way that redefines death and sanctifies it. In Your death God's love becomes fully transparent – the chasm has been bridged. The veil which shrouds us from fully knowing God's love in this life is ripped asunder, and we will behold the glory of God face-to-face. For the man or woman in You, Christ Jesus, death is established in love and consummates loving union with God. It is not the ultimate failure, but the ultimate victory. And this is possible because of Your surrender on the Cross, and Your resurrection power.

**Application:** *Can I say, along with the Psalmist, that even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I do not fear the power of death?*