

I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD

JOHN 10:11-18

How do you picture God? David Heller, a psychologist, has done an extensive study on the ideas and images of God that get formed in the early years of children's lives. He studied 40 young children between the ages of four and twelve to find out how children picture God. Three prevailing images of God emerged from his research. The first image Heller called, "God, the Friendly Ghost" because these kids pictured God as a congenial spirit being that makes friends with children and plays with them. God is like an imaginary playmate with extraordinary powers. A second image of God Heller called, "God, the Lover in Heaven" because these kids thought of God as a kind of Sir Lancelot figure – romanticized, sentimentalized. The third image of God Heller called, "Dr. God, the Therapist" because these children saw God as a healing, nurturing person who cures all the problems in their family and in the world, too.

So, how do you picture God today? Jesus was a master at painting mental portraits of what God is like. Some of that rich imagery is preserved for us in His I AM statements we're studying this Lenten season. By using that phrase, "I AM", Jesus recognized and owned His own deity. But by adding a picture or an image to it – "I am the bread of life; I am the true vine, I am the light of the world, I am the resurrection and the life" – Jesus underlined the impact His deity makes on our humanity.

The picture of God we're considering today is one of the most meaningful of all of them. Let's read it just now. Jesus says, "I AM the Good Shepherd." By using that picture, Jesus suggests, "I AM God who acts towards you in much the same way that a loving, responsible shepherd cares for and treats his flock of sheep." There's at least three things that a good shepherd provides his sheep. And there's at least three things God gives us.

A GOOD SHEPHERD SACRIFICIES HIMSELF.

Jesus chose a well known image to the people of His day. Back then, shepherding was the basis of the economy in Palestine. It wasn't easy work by any means. Shepherds were required to actually live with the sheep for months in isolated areas in their never ending search for adequate pasture. If you wanted to be a good shepherd, you had to be constantly vigilant, fearlessly courageous and patiently loving with the sheep themselves. It was actually hard finding a good shepherd. In fact, it was so easy to be an irresponsible and careless shepherd in Jesus' day that most of them had a bad reputation.

Nevertheless, way back in Old Testament times we find God inviting His people to think of Him as a shepherd and they as His flock of sheep. The best known of all the psalms starts out with these familiar words, "The LORD is my shepherd...." (Psalm 23:1 NIV). Isaiah, the prophet, described God like this, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding

them close to his heart....” (Isaiah 40:11 NLT) In addition, many of Israel’s greatest leaders actually were shepherds at one point in their lives – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David. So this picture of God as a shepherd was a powerful, well-known image to the people of Jesus’ day and time.

What did Jesus mean by calling Himself the good shepherd? That adjective “good” can mean being morally upright, but it means more than that here. When you move into a new community, you might ask a neighbor to refer you to a “good” doctor. What does that mean? You’re not just looking for a doctor who’s skillful, efficient and reputable. No, you want more than that. Don’t you want a doctor who’s personable and caring – one who takes time to listen and explain? Good, in that context, means supportive, kind, sympathetic and caring. When you find a physician like that, you say, “Oh, now she’s a good doctor.”

I still remember Dr. Johnson very well. He was my pediatrician growing up. Dr. Johnson was a plumb, jolly, middle-aged man with squinty eyes behind thick glasses. I can still recall waiting in one of his examination rooms and then hearing his booming voice coming down the hall towards me, “Well, how’s my Ricky boy, today?” Dr. Johnson knew how to make children feel at ease. No doubt there were other pediatricians as skillful and knowledgeable as Dr. Johnson, but I never would have wanted to go to anyone else. He was supportive and caring. Dr. Johnson was a good doctor.

It’s that sense of goodness that Jesus describes here. Of course, as the good shepherd He is upright, competent and skillful, but more than that Jesus is approachable, caring, and, above all, sacrificial. Look again at what He says, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary.” (John 10:11 MSG) Shepherds are responsible for the lives of their sheep. Sheep are utterly defenseless creatures and easy prey for wolves or hyenas – common predators in that day and time. In addition, shepherds have to guard them from thieves. Being a shepherd can be risky, dangerous work. Occasionally, a faithful shepherd might even lose his life trying to defend his flock. That only happens when a shepherd has a very deep commitment to and love for his flock. I’m not sure I’d sacrifice my life for some dumb sheep! That was exactly the attitude of most shepherds in Jesus’ day and why there were so few “good” shepherds around.

Did you hear Jesus predicting His own death in this passage? Two important truths emerge from what Jesus says here. First of all, His death was voluntary. He says, “This is why the Father loves me: because I freely lay down my life. And so I am free to take it up again. No one takes it from me. I lay it down of my own free will. I have the right to lay it down; I also have the right to take it up again. I received this authority personally from my Father.” (John 10:17-18 MSG) Don’t let anyone ever convince you that Jesus’ death on the cross was some kind of tragic mistake that could have been avoided. This was no preventable accident. For instance, we’ve had at least two tragedies related to

the space shuttle over the years resulting in the loss of both crews. Most experts agree that given the odds and the immense physical forces involved, occasional accidents are just going to happen. Jesus was never a victim of fate or circumstances. The cross was not a tragic accident. Jesus' death there was the plan and purpose of God before the world was created. Jesus was born to die. He gave up His life for you and me voluntarily.

The other truth is that Jesus' death was vicarious. A vicarious death is to die in the place of someone else. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." (John 10:11 NLT) Jesus didn't die as punishment for His own sin, because the Bible teaches He was sinless. Instead, He died for your sins and mine that we might be freed from the penalty of our own sin: eternal death and separation from God. The Bible says, "We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him." (Romans 5:7-8 MSG) A good shepherd sacrifices himself. Here's something else he does.

A GOOD SHEPHERD GIVES SIGNIFICANCE.

What does the culture we live in suggest is the basis for your personal worth, significance and value? It looks at the value of your financial assets, your educational degrees, your IQ, your job, your talents or how many influential friends and acquaintances you've gathered over the years. Most people believe that personal significance depends on having those kinds of things show up prominently in your life. As a result, very few people measure up.

Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, reminds us of a fundamental truth that can revolutionize the way you think about yourself. Here it is: God's love for you is what makes your life significant. By His care for you, the Good Shepherd transmits eternal value to your life. If you don't believe God loves you, where do you get any sense of personal significance? What's your life worth? You're simply this accidental conglomeration of atoms, molecules and tissues with no purpose. You're a meaningless blob of matter destined to live out your few years on the planet and then just die off. But here we read that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down His life for the likes of you and me! When that truth really gets a hold of you it will change forever how you live and for whom you live.

Some years ago I read a story about 15 year old Felipe Garza. At the time, he was a physically small, below average eighth grade student of poor parents in the farming town of Patterson, California. He and his family lived in a converted motel. Felipe had developed a crush on 14 year old Donna Ashlock. He had dated her just once. Shortly after Christmas, Felipe learned that Donna had an enlarged heart and wasn't expected to live more than two months. Felipe had his own serious health issues: he suffered from severe headaches. Oddly enough,

he said to his mother, "If I die, give my heart to my girlfriend." When a blood vessel ruptured in Felipe's brain, killing him, his heart was transplanted into Donna's chest. Her father said, "Without what he did for Donna, there would be two tragedies instead of one."

Don't you think that Donna Ashlock feels immeasurably significant because of Felipe Garza's love for her? My friend, your life is immeasurably significant because God loves you. He loved you enough to have the Good Shepherd die in your place. Now Jesus wants to bring that kind of eternal, personal significance to everyone's life and He wants to use you and me to share that message. Do you see it there in v. 16? "I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd." (John 10:16 NLT)

There's nothing exclusive about Jesus in the sense of who He invites into a relationship with Himself. His heart is so great and so large that it offers everyone a place in the fold. And He invites us to assist Him in that great mission. We're approaching Holy Week and Easter Day. Is there someone in your life today – someone you work with, someone you go to school with, someone you live next door to, someone you live with – that you're pretty sure is outside God's sheepfold? I don't know who's supposed to be in God's sheepfold or not, but Jesus does. My job is to assume that everyone is potentially one of His sheep and so to do everything – prayer, friendship, conversation, invitation – to move him or her towards God's sheepfold. Jesus wants to use those who are already His sheep to reach those who are not yet His sheep but will be.

Would you remember that on a Sunday morning? I believe that every visitor who comes in here does so by divine appointment. Whether or not you're an official greeter or usher, as one of God's sheep you've been given the privilege to extend God's significance to a new guest. Don't let a new person go unwelcomed. Don't let a guest stand alone by himself or herself. By the same token, be on the lookout for people who've maybe been here forever but just need to know again that they are of ultimate value in the sight of God. Every Sunday presents you with an opportunity to touch the lives of wounded, dazed fellow sheep. When you put your arms around someone who's struggling and say – "You know, I sense life's beating you up right now. I love you and I'm praying for you" – you become God's way of extending His significance.

In the late 1800s a poor little man clutching his coat and making his way up a windy Chicago street passed an open church door. A well meaning deacon of that church tried to intercept him right there on the sidewalk with an offer of warmth and shelter from the cold wind. But the man replied, "Thank you, sir, but I'll not come in. I'm going up to Mr. Moody's Sunday school." He was talking about the ministry of Dwight Moody who became the Billy Graham of his day. "Son," asked the deacon, "why would you walk blocks up to Mr. Moody's Sunday school when you could come in here?" The man replied, "It's because they love

a little fella up there.” Don’t you want people to say that about Karl Road Baptist Church – “they love the little fella up there?” The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. That brings ultimate personal significance to your life and gives you every reason to share the message of that significance with others. There’s something else the Good Shepherd does for the sheep.

A GOOD SHEPHERD GIVES SECURITY.

God’s love makes you special, true enough. That means that you can live life with great courage and assurance. When you know you belong to God and are loved by Him, that’s security. When you’re not sure you belong to Him and you question His love for you, that’s insecurity. Knowing you belong to the Good Shepherd is the basis for deep, lasting inner security.

In Jesus day, sheep weren’t raised to be slaughtered and eaten primarily. Instead, they were raised and carefully cared for in order to produce wool. As a result, most sheep often lived in a flock until they just got old and died. The shepherd got to know them personally. They knew his voice and were afraid of anyone else. The shepherd gave the sheep a deep sense of security.

Are you glad this morning that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows you inside and out? That truth brings great comfort to our hearts. God knows you far better than you know yourself. There’s no way you can pull the wool over His eyes (pun intended!). Nothing you ever do shocks God. Have you ever been shocked by your own behavior? I certainly have been. I’ve said to myself, “Now, where did that bad attitude, that harsh word, that ugly resentment, that unjustified anger come from? Has that really been in me all along?” And it’s as if Jesus says to me, “Well, yes, Rick, that’s been in there all this time. I’ve known about it. I’m not shocked or surprised by it. I love you despite its presence in your life. But I’ve let you see it just now so that I can change it by My grace.” Fellow sheep, there is nothing that can ever separate you from the Good Shepherd’s love.

Did you know that by comparing you to a sheep, Jesus wasn’t being particularly flattering? Sheep are kind of dumb. For example, sheep like to wander away from the rest of the flock in order to find food. A sheep can be standing there in perfectly good pasture – all the grass he’ll ever need – and yet, if there’s a way to escape and wander off, he’ll do it. Sound familiar? How does the Bible put it? “All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own.” (Isaiah 53:6 NLT) Fortunately, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is constantly on the alert to keep you from wandering off and seeking you out when you do manage to get lost. Sheep are defenseless. If they’re confronted by a predator, they often just stand there paralyzed in fear until they’re attacked and killed. They’re not very discriminating about what they eat and so the shepherd has to make sure they don’t die from some poisonous plant. Did you know that sheep can get stuck on their backs like an upside down turtle so that they’re unable to move? If the shepherd didn’t get them back on their feet, they’d die. In other

words, sheep need constant care and protection. Sound familiar? How does the Bible put it? “I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace,’ says the Sovereign LORD.” (Ezekiel 34:15 NLT)

A final thought. Even though sheep are needy creatures, they can be very useful and productive. That’s good news for sheep like you and me! We can be useful and productive for the Lord, too! What’s needed is a Good Shepherd who loves and cares for the sheep and sheep who will do what He says. I was interested to learn that sheep have unique personalities and that a good shepherd knows the differences between his sheep. He knows how to manage each individual sheep in his flock and maximize his or her unique potential. You don’t have to be identical to all of God’s other sheep. My conversion experience is probably different than yours. My walk with God isn’t identical to yours. I have gifts that you don’t have and you have abilities I don’t have. It’s not important that we all be exactly alike. What is important is that we all have the same shepherd: Jesus, the Good Shepherd. You’re only responsible for being you as God made you to be and then in becoming whoever God wants you to become.

The Good Shepherd: He’s the only One who gives you any basis for courage and security in living out your life. He’s the only One who can be fully trusted to help and lead you. He knows us – our differences, our tendency to wander, our helplessness and our great potential to be useful for Him. And His knowledge of us is always wrapped up in His love for us. The Bible says, “Now may the God of peace - who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep,... - may he equip you with all you need for doing his will. May he produce in you, through the power of Jesus Christ, every good thing that is pleasing to him.” (Hebrews 13:20-21 NLT)

Ron and Joke Jones, Christian missionaries in Israel, are frequent witnesses to the fighting and killing in that part of the world. On more than one occasion it has left a profound sense of discouragement that hovers over the country. Several times the Joneses have come into closer contact with this ongoing conflict than their comfort zone allowed. A friend shared with them something she observed that was a delightful reminder to the Joneses of God's care. She watched a shepherd caring for his flock near the area where guns were being fired. Every time the shots rang out the sheep scattered in fright. The shepherd then touched each of them with his staff and spoke calmly to them. The sheep settled down immediately because they trusted the shepherd. And then another shot sounded, and the same routine happened again. Each time, the sheep needed the shepherd to re-orient them again and to reassure them they were safe. We are like those sheep, and our Shepherd reaches out and touches us with His love, comfort and security. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He sacrifices Himself. He gives significance to our lives. He gives security in the midst of all of life’s uncertainties.