

Sermon: Hired Hand or Good Shepherd?

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18**

The lectionary pairs Psalm 23 with John's Gospel reading about the good shepherd, and we blended it into our call to worship today. We've read the psalm several times in the past year or so, and one thing about it finally jumped out at me: when the psalmist says, 'thy rod and thy staff they comfort me,' he's pointing out the fact that the shepherd is armed to the teeth, so naturally, that's a comfort to the sheep.

We don't often think of a shepherd in this way. Theirs is a dirty, dangerous, and lonely job. In the first century, shepherds were the lowest of the low in terms of their profession, and it was a bit of shock to Luke's audience that these were the people who witnessed the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem. But throughout Scripture, shepherds are steadfast, strong, and prepared for anything. They would find you if you were lost. They would even fight for your life.

In today's Gospel passage, in verse 11, Jesus says, 'I am the good shepherd.' Immediately before this, in verse nine, he says, 'I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.' His words confused and divided the religious authorities who heard him. A little later, in the portico of Solomon in the Temple, they cornered him and asked, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' And Jesus answered, 'I have told you, but you don't believe because you do not belong to my sheep.'

Any time Jesus is rejected, and this is one of those times, it's because he doesn't give them the answer they are looking for. This group decides to stone Jesus mainly because they were looking for the kind of Messiah who would overthrow Caesar. Instead, they saw Jesus as a mere human being who was making himself God. Here's my question: if Caesar himself were standing before them, would they want to stone him too? Because there was a guy who really made himself out to be a god. But it probably would have been too dangerous, so...

Knowing there was a deep misunderstanding about the Messiah role, Jesus resorted to other metaphors to describe himself. So, he is both the gate to the sheepfold and the shepherd.

He most definitely is not some hired hand. He cares for the sheep – *all* the sheep, even those who are not yet part of the flock. He makes it clear that he is the good shepherd, the one who would lay down his life for his sheep. He also makes it clear that *no one* takes his life from him – he gives it willingly. The Gospels show that he can escape hostile crowds when he must (John 10:39, Luke 4:28-30), which underscores the point that his looming death on the Cross is his choice.

In his letter, John ups the ante. As Jesus laid down his life for us, we ought to lay down our lives for one another. That's the sign of a real love abiding in us as it abides in Jesus, that we *ought* to love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. He makes it a commandment, not an option, for the people of the Way, those early Christians who, as Harvey Cox wrote, were bound together in their 'common participation in the life of the Spirit and a way of life that included sharing prayer, bread, and wine,' and who hoped for God's peace on earth.¹

God's actions show us what God is like, beginning at the beginning with the act of Creation, and later by raising the Israelites up out of slavery, and then, in John, chapter 3, 'for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.' Actions are a test of love. In literature, think of the two lovers in *Romeo & Juliet*, or the hero in *A Tale of Two Cities* who said, 'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done.'

The poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who just turned 99 in March and who describes himself as 'an anarchist at heart,' wrote a poem not too long ago called *Pity the Nation*, and its first line reads: "Pity the nation whose people are sheep, and whose shepherds mislead them."

Now we might have a different opinion about our being called sheep when the shepherd is Jesus. But when the shepherds are bad, even evil, people, then, yes, pity those who are misled. It has happened over and over throughout human history and it's still happening today, all around the world. But why would people purposely mislead others? Why do some people forsake God's grace and abundance and become like the hired hand in John's Gospel?

People have always had their own gods. In Abram's time, they were hand-made idols and every house had theirs. Some gods became Olympians, while others lived in Asgard. In time, people gave up on their clay figurines and began worshipping money and power and control. There are just enough of these hired hands to cause untold misery for everyone else. Our history is littered with the despair of the many, caused by the few.

The world around us constantly challenges our faith and spiritual self-confidence. God knows us better than we do. Sometimes when we think we've failed, God thinks otherwise, if ours is a principled, prayerful life lived according to God's commandments.

John wrote that we ought to lay down our lives for another. We ought to show our love in truth and in our actions. And we needn't carry the whole world on our backs. John says to take it a little at a time, whenever we see *a brother or sister* in need, like the homeless guy who is only asking for some spare change, not our entire portfolio; or someone else who might appreciate just *half* a sandwich, not all of it plus our chips and pickle.

We all have our work to do, our companies to run, our bills to pay. But at the end of the day, we're called to live our lives for others as Jesus did for us. He said it's his job to bring all the other sheep to the fold, to make one flock with one shepherd, but we can care for the flock.

When we let God's love guide us toward serving the needs of others, when we reorient ourselves in that direction, that's what it means to lay down our lives. As Dickens wrote, again in *A Tale of Two Cities*, "Think now and then that there is a man who would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you."

Amen.

¹ Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010), 77-78.