Jesus, the Good Shepherd

John 10:1-21

Key Verse:10:11 “ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

The picture of a shepherd and sheep was a familiar one in the ancient Middle East. Jacob in the Old Testament was a shepherd, and the romance between Jacob and Rachael at the well was a famous love story. King David was also a shepherd when he was young. In the Old Testament God compares himself to a shepherd and his people Israel to his sheep. David described God as his shepherd in Psalm 23:1,2 saying, “*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pasture, he leads me beside quiet waters*,...” In today’s passage Jesus said that he is the good shepherd and he explained why. Those who follow Jesus want to be good shepherds like Jesus. Let us study why Jesus is the good shepherd for his sheep, and how we can be good shepherds like him.

First, the good shepherd knows his sheep (1-6). When I said that a shepherd enters the sheep pen by the gate, someone may ask if there are other ways to come into the sheep pen. Yes! Jesus said that a thief or a robber climbs into the sheep pen. Jesus said in verse 2, “***The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.***” What is the difference between the shepherd and the thief? Their motivation to enter the sheep pen is different. The shepherd enters the sheep pen to take care of his sheep, whereas the thief does so to steal and to kill the sheep. When the gatekeeper opens the gate for the shepherd, the sheep listen to the shepherd’s voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. (3-4)

What a beautiful and peaceful picture of a shepherd with his sheep! In ancient days a shepherd named each sheep so that it would be easy to handle them. He called their names to bring them out to the field. He called their names when he brought them back to the sheep pen. He called their names when they needed special care. The sheep recognized the shepherd’s voice and came to him, saying, “Mme!” God called each of us by name. God called Adam, “Adam, where are you?” (Ge 3:9) God called Abraham, “Abraham, leave your country, your people, and your household and go the land I will show you.” (Ge 12:1) God called Moses, “Moses, go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘This is what the Lord says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me.” (Ex 8:1) When God called each of us, he called our name. Paul, Luke, Kit, James, Elizabeth, Grace, Joseph, Hannah, Mary, Esther, Melissa,… and so on.

What does it mean that God calls each of us by name? This means that God knows us - all things and everything about us. God knew where Adam was even though Adam hid himself behind the tree. It was like a father knowing where his little son was hiding in the closet after messing up his office. God knew how Abraham would respond to his command even though Abraham did not know where he was going. God knew what Moses would say before Pharaoh even though Moses had no idea about the future of his people. God knows each of us, about everything, because he created all of us. He knows where we came from, where we are going, what we are thinking, and why we are thinking that way, and so on. God said to the prophet Jeremiah, “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations*.” (Jer 1:5) God knew how Jeremiah grew and what kind of person he would be even before Jeremiahs was born. The psalmist said in Psalm 139:1-3, “*You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.*” You may think that no one knows you or understands your situation. You may not know who you are. But God knows. God knows who you are, what kind of person you are going to be, which way you will go. This is because he is your creator and he is your shepherd.

Jesus said in verses 14-15. “***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***.” Jesus knew the Father’s will. Jesus also knew how difficult it would be for him to obey the Father’s will. He knew that the Father’s will was for him to take up the cross and die for the sins of the world. Jesus knew how cruel and painful a task it would be for him to become the Lamb of God. He wanted to avoid the painful moment if it was possible. But he knew the Father’s will. He knew what the Father wanted him to do. So he denied himself to obey the Father’s will. The Father God knew how difficult it would be for his Son Jesus to carry the cross. He knew how painful the crucifixion would be. Still, he knew that Jesus would obey his will for world salvation. Jesus knew that God the Father so loved the world that he would sacrifice himself for the sins of the world. That is why Jesus said, “*just as the Father knows me and I know the Father---and I lay down my life for the sheep*.”

Do not underestimate the power and the wisdom of God. Our God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present. As the watchmaker knows all the parts and function of the watch, so God knows all things and everything about us because he is our maker. He knows our birth, destiny, and future. He cares for us as a shepherd cares for his sheep. Jesus calls each of us by name because he is our good shepherd.

The fact that Jesus knows us well indicates our intimate relationship with Jesus. There is a difference between knowing someone and knowing about someone. In order to know someone we need to spend time with them, talk with them, and even to live with them. Thus knowing someone requires a personal relationship and experience. On the other hand, knowing about someone does not require such efforts. When we get information about them, we know about who they are, where they live, what kind of jobs they have, and so on. The relationship between a good shepherd and his sheep is not a superficial relationship, but an intimate, trusting, and loving relationship. When Jesus said, “*I know my sheep and my sheep know me*”, he spoke about our intimate relationship with him.

Sheep are near-sighted animals. They can’t see well, but hear sounds well. They distinguish the voice of their shepherd from the voices of strangers. They don’t follow a stranger because they recognize the voice of their shepherd. If a stranger imitates the voice of the shepherd, the sheep realize it and run away from him in panic. (5) Jesus used this figure of speech for the sake of the Pharisees, who should have been shepherds for his people. But they did not understand what Jesus was telling them. (6) They were spiritually dumb and blind.

Second, the good shepherd is the gate for the sheep (7-10). Jesus said in verse 7 that he is the gate for the sheep. Look at verses7-10. “***Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly 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***.” The gate is the way to life for the sheep. The gate is their access to green pasture. The gate is their opening for quiet water. The gate is the symbol of protection and safety. Residents prefer gated apartment complexes because they provide them with security and safety. For the sheep, the gate is their access to life. They come in and go out and find pasture through the gate. The shepherd leads them out through the gate and brings them into the sheep pen through the gate. Those who do not use the gate are all thieves and robbers. Their purpose for approaching the sheep is to steal them and kill them. But Jesus came to us to give us a life; eternal, abundant, satisfying, and fulfilling.

Jesus is the gate for eternal life. Jesus said in John 14:6, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*.” The gate is the access for food. Through the gate we can gain food. Through the gate we have peace and rest. Through the gate we reach the kingdom. Jesus is the gate to heaven and the access for eternal life. The gate of eternal life for men was shut since Adam’s Fall. But Jesus opened it wide again through his death and resurrection. When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. In the same token, Jesus opened the gate of heaven through his death and resurrection. The gate is like a window on a computer. When we open the window, we can see and experience a new world. In the same way, when we enter through the gate Jesus, we experience life eternal, abundant, plus much more. The password for the gate is ‘faith’.

In these verses, those who came before Jesus were not prophets, but the Pharisees and the other corrupted religious leaders. They were not shepherds, but thieves and robbers. They did not take care of the man who was born blind, but used him only for their selfish purposes. They tried to kill Jesus and to destroy the blind man. The prophet Ezekiel prophesied about them in Ezekiel 34:1-6, “*The word of the Lord came to me:****2****“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?****3****You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.****4****You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.****5****So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals.****6****My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.”*

Third, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (11-21) Look at verse 11. ***“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep***.” What is the difference between the good shepherd and the hired hand man? Jesus said in verses12-14, “***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 hired hand feeds the sheep for money. He takes care of the sheep to get paid. The hired hand does not risk his life for the sheep because he feeds the sheep only for the sake of money. The sheep’s safety is not his responsibility. But the shepherd is different. The shepherd is responsible for the sheep’s safety and their lives. So he risks his life to protect his sheep. In the Old Testament, Jacob was the good shepherd. He took care of the sheep of his uncle Laban day and night as his own. (Ge 31:38-41). David was the good shepherd. According to his testimony in 1 Samuel 17:34-35, David said, “*When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it*.” David risked his life to rescue his sheep because he was a good shepherd. He was one of the good shepherds like Abraham and Jacob. But Jesus is The Good Shepherd. This is because he laid down his life for the sheep. Jesus is the Messiah who would take away the sins of the world. He is the fulfillment of God’s covenant for our salvation.

The Pharisees and the religious leaders caught a woman in the act of adultery and brought her before Jesus in order to test him. They used such a poor woman as bait to trap Jesus. They also summoned the man born blind to hear his testimony, not to know the truth, but to accuse Jesus. They used the poor blind beggar to satisfy their selfish and evil desires. But Jesus was different. Jesus knew that he would be accused as a law-breaker if he healed the man on the Sabbath. He knew that he would be under life-threatening danger. But he did not mind for his life. He was ready to give his life for the sheep. Finally, he went up to the hill of Golgatha to carry the cross for the sins of the world. He had authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. Still, he obeyed the Father’s will and took up the cross. He is the good shepherd, but he became the Lamb of God in order to take away the sins of the world. (Jn 1:29) Praise Jesus who laid down his life for us, the sheep. Because of his sacrificial death on the cross we are saved. Because of his substitutional punishment for our sins we are redeemed. By his wounds we are healed. Praise our good shepherd Jesus!

The good shepherd takes care of the sheep which are in other’s sheep pens. Here Jesus meant that the sheep in other’s sheep pens are the gentiles. Jesus wanted to save all people of all nations through him. Jesus said in verse 16. “***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***.” How can the sheep in other’s sheep pens become one flock under one shepherd? How can the gentiles who are different races, speak different languages, and eat different foods become one people of God? This is possible when they all listen to the voice of our good shepherd Jesus. Those who listen to Jesus’ word become one flock of God’s sheep. Paul said in Galatians 3:26-28, “*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*.” We expect the great work of the Holy Spirit in ISBC 2018. People of 90 nations will gather in Louisville Kentucky and worship the Lord Jesus together and praise him for four days. Despite our differences of race, nationality, culture, language, generation, and food, we all become one flock of God and worship the Lamb of God Jesus with songs, psalms, and hymns.

We all want to be good shepherds like Jesus, don’t we? How can we become good shepherds for God’s sheep? We first must be good sheep of Jesus. We must listen to him. We must block our ears from strangers’ voices in the world and open our ears to Jesus’ word. Next we must follow him. Can’t we follow Jesus until we lay down our lives for the sheep? If we do so, we are blessed. But Jesus said, “*If anyone who comes after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.*” (Mt 16:24, Mk 8:34, Lk 9:23) In order to listen to Jesus, we must deny ourselves. In order to follow Jesus, we must deny our pride, selfishness, jealousy, arrogance, and lust, and pursue the righteousness of God. It is not easy for us to be good shepherds. People followed Jesus, but many of them dropped out on the way because they did not want to deny themselves for the sheep. I experienced these difficulties yesterday, but with God’s grace, I denied myself for the sheep.

In today’s passage Jesus taught us why he is the good shepherd for his sheep. He went ahead of us and showed us a good example by laying down his life on the cross. I pray that we may be good sheep of Jesus and listen to him and follow him so that we may also become good shepherds like Jesus. Once, Mother Teresa was asked by a reporter, “What do you think is the most urgent and serious problem on this earth?” The reporter might have expected an answer from her, “poverty”. But she said, “It is loneliness.” There are many lonely people who are rejected and isolated from this world by the power of sin. There are many of God’s sheep who were attacked by the wolves and scattered in remote and dangerous places. There are many broken and wounded souls who are waiting for the healing hand of God. There are many lost sheep who need rescue by their shepherd. May God bless all of us to become good shepherds for God’s flock of sheep! May God make America a shepherd nation for the whole world! Amen!