

Images of the shepherd and his sheep; Father, leader, guide, flock, familiar voice, follow, hired hand, wolves, scatter, church, community of believers, you and me. There are many references for God and his people as Shepherd and Sheep throughout the Bible.

Sheep are the most prominent animal mentioned in the Bible.

And Shepherding is the first profession we read about in the Bible;

Abel kept flocks; his offering was looked upon with favor

by God. Moses was a shepherd, so was Abraham, David,

Isaac and Jacob. God is our shepherd too!

So, shepherding is a good thing... there's good news in these words, but also some challenging words.

The shepherd's tasks are demanding: feed the sheep, care for them, keep them gathered together so they don't get lost or go astray, and put their well-being above his own. The occupation has inherent risks – protecting the flock from wolves, thieves and robbers. **Have you had wolves in your life that sent you running?**

Chris Andrews, now a Methodist pastor, tells his story of wolves in his life and how the church saved him. Both of his parents were alcoholics; both died by their own hands through suicide. Chris said they lived from day to day in a volatile world of economic uncertainty – **and the church came.**

He says, “The local Methodist church showed up with food, clothes, and, most of all, kindness. They welcomed me into their fellowship. They made me part of their choir. They said I was important to them. I had nothing to offer in return, but they did not care about that. **The church came.**

“They offered a new economics, *the economics of grace*. All I knew is that I was one lost young fellow, and **these good people put the arms of Jesus around my life** and sent me in a new direction of hope and meaning and purpose. **I had found Jesus, or Jesus had found me, and my life was forever changed.**”

The Good Shepherd, through the sheep of his flock, came into Chris’ life and gave him a new life!

How easy it is to be self-absorbed; run from responsibilities, run when wolves come near, interested in our own gain. We hear people say, “I am not interested. I don’t want to do anything. I’m not joining a church. I’m not participating. I don’t need people in my life. I don’t care!

My suspicion is that we would rather believe that there **are NOT** people in the world like this: self-centered, indifferent types who betray others through their uncaring attitudes, but there are. They’re the ‘hired hands’ as Jesus calls them, who act out their own selfish ambition at the expense of the flock’s well-being. Perhaps the wolves in our life have been pride, greed, anger, envy, resentment or deceit.

The hired hand has no passion to stop him or herself from these temptations. So the flock, his country, family, his business, his church, his community is injured or scattered. It goes awry and we wonder why. What happened? I was standing watch or so I thought. The flock gets scattered or devoured due to a shepherd's neglect. We read about situations like this in the news whose shepherd (leader) has led them to destruction or ruin, from a nation in turmoil, to a business collapse, a family's demise, or a sports empire falling apart. **The wolf kills.**

The Good Shepherd doesn't kill, but gives life.

A good shepherd doesn't work for the reward or for money. The Good Shepherd "opens his heart" and loves the people he serves. An unfaithful shepherd comes into the job only for the pay he could get. He is the hired hand and won't stay to defend attacks by wolves. He will run, saving his own life. I certainly have had times in my life when I was not courageous and faithful, and ran instead of serving. But what do I want to do? I want to "open my heart" and serve. I need someone to show me the way.

Jesus' said, "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." Ugh! Reminds me of my first formal dance class in junior high school. Remember, the girls on one side of the gym and the boys on the other and we were told to go over to the other side and choose a dance partner. That was

uncomfortable! Sometimes we prefer to ignore the fact that other sheep will hear Jesus' voice. **Who are the other sheep that are not of our sheep pen?**

There was one church, one flock for a long time. The Roman Catholic church considered itself the universal church of all Christians, but that changed dramatically during the Reformation Period of the 16th century. Reformed strains of Christian faith popped up all over Europe and the Middle East. Today, there are thousands of denominations calling themselves Christian, who follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

But we hardly feel united, one flock. We feel divided, as more and more leave one denomination to start a new denomination. Are we willing to “open our hearts” and show mutual love for “others” that don't exactly look, talk, dress, shop, work, or worship like us, yet call themselves Christians? The other sheep who listen to Jesus push us to unlearn our exclusiveness and the special privileges befitting our social class. And if truth be told, most of us don't like it!

**However, who the church is cannot be separated from who Jesus is –
one flock, one shepherd.**

Jesus reveals himself as the good shepherd, uniting us into one flock. The one flock of Christians seems scattered throughout our world. Through Christ's union with God the Father and through his union with his flock, because he laid down his life for us, we can become one. Jesus says his sheep will listen to his

voice. The Jewish leaders didn't listen to Jesus. People today don't listen to Jesus' voice either. It seems that we who follow Jesus Christ, still have work to do!

We should be familiar by now with being called sheep but somehow I suspect that we'd prefer to be called in another way.

We prefer for people to call us by our name or a familiar nickname. Sometimes we are called by our titles; doctor, nurse, teacher, coach; sometimes by an adjective that may or may not really describe us; Big Spender, Baby Face, Old Blue Eyes.

Jesus calls his sheep with a voice they recognize. They hear it and know it and they follow it. It is a friendly voice; not strange or mean or one that would make us afraid. But Jesus didn't coddle his followers – he taught, challenged, encouraged and sometimes confused them. He made them think. They had to listen and see God's work in a new way, a new light.

I don't know for you what Jesus' voice sounds like. I believe it's different for each of us and it's not what we might expect. But, you know when it's a stranger's voice don't you? We know that a stranger's voice doesn't sit well with us and we're wary, timid, fearful. We often go the opposite direction when hearing a stranger's voice.

There are many competing voices out there calling us to be something different than what God want us to be. There are many distractions on our

pathways of life. We belong to Jesus the good shepherd who leads us and loves us and died for us.

Sometimes we fail to recognize God in our life; we don't hear God; that friendly voice calling us to follow. So he tells us he'll lay down his life for us. Do we hear that? Jesus lays down his life for you and for me. He gives his life. He cares. He is willing to fight evil and darkness. Jesus lays down his life for the others too, not just you and me; for others outside the sheepfold. Jesus reaches out and claims us all.

A good shepherd of Palestinian practice would indeed put his life on the line for his sheep. He had complete responsibility of them. Out on the hillsides at night, he would put his sheep into a walled enclosure with an opening the sheep could go in and out of. At night the shepherd would lay across this opening and expose his life to wild animals, thieves and robbers, any of them might claim his life.

The shepherd, literally, laid down his life. It is through Jesus that we find access to God. Jesus laid down his life but he didn't lose it. **Is there anything for which you would lay down your life?**

Jesus said three times, "I lay down my life for the sheep." Jesus cares for you. And we, your church, care too. Let us open our hearts and serve the Good Shepherd. Amen.