The Gospel of John: The Parable of the Shepherd and His Sheep
John 10:1-21

As we turn the page from John 9 into John 10, it is important to remember that we have not moved a single inch in terms of time and audience. The conversation between Jesus and the indignant Pharisees that began in John 9:40 continues all the way through our thought unit this morning. With that context in mind, let us stand and read together John 10:1-21:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6 This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. 7 So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. 11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

19 There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. 20 Many of them said, “He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?” 21 Others said, “These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

Though we read all 21 verses of this discourse, I want you to know that we will only cover a small section of this text this morning. I will be returning to these verses next week and maybe the week after, so plan on pitching your tent right here for a while!

This morning I will devote the majority of my time addressing the biblical and historical context of this parable that would have been well known amongst those whom Jesus is addressing. Then, as time allows, I will begin to unpack some of the powerful meaning of this parable, though we will endeavor to plumb the meaning of this teaching in earnest next week and possibly the week after. If you are taking notes, my message this morning will fall under three subheadings: 1) the biblical imagery of sheep and shepherds; 2) the historical assumptions about sheep and shepherds; and 3) the contrast between thief and shepherd.

I. The Biblical Imagery of Shepherds and Sheep

If you have ever read the Bible, you know that the imagery of sheep and shepherds is common throughout the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps the most famous Psalm of all, the 23 Psalm, begins with these words: “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters.” Some of you might recall Psalm 95:7-8 “For He is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” or
Psalm 100:3 “Know that the Lord, he is God! It is He who made us, and we are His; we are his people, and the sheep of His pasture.”

Now, of all the metaphors to use, why would the biblical writers employ the imagery of sheep and shepherds? NT scholar William Barclay explains why:

There is no better loved picture of Jesus than the Good Shepherd. The picture of the shepherd is woven into the language and imagery of the Bible. It could not be otherwise. The main part of Judaea was a central plateau, stretching from Bethel to Hebron for a distance of about 35 miles and varying from 14-17 miles across. The ground, for most part, was rough and stony. Judaea was much more a pastoral than an agricultural country; and [it] was, therefore, inevitable that the most familiar figure of the Judaean uplands was the shepherd.

Now, biblically speaking, the imagery of the Shepherd typically pointed to God Himself, as we observed in Psalm 23:1, “The LORD is my Shepherd…” Apparently, in the ancient middle east, to suggest that God was “my Shepherd” was a high compliment to God and a comfort to the believer, but why? Let us again listen to William Barclay as he describes the role of the ancient shepherd:

His life was very hard. No flock ever grazed without a shepherd, and he was never off duty. There being little grass, the sheep were bound to wander, and since there was no protecting walls, the sheep had constantly to be watched. On either side of the narrow plateau the ground dipped sharply down to the craggy deserts and the sheep were always liable to stray away and get lost. The shepherd’s task was not only constant but dangerous, for, in addition, he had to guard the flock against wild animals, especially against wolves, and there were always thieves and robbers ready to steal the sheep.

Old Testament scholar, Sir George Adam Smith, traveled with Palestinian shepherds for some time, and he writes:

On some high moor, across which at night the hyaenas howl, when you meet him, sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, leaning on his staff, and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one of them on his heart, you understand why the shepherd of Judaea sprang to the front in his people’s history; why they gave his name to their king, and made him the symbol of providence; why Christ took him as the type of self-sacrifice.”

Unlike the Greeks and Romans who pictured the gods to be capricious, cruel, and uncaring for humanity…unlike the Canaanites who sacrificed their children in hopes of earning the gods’ favor…the Israelites understood their God to be their Shepherd—and He was a Good Shepherd who cared deeply for His flock. He was their protector, their leader, their provider, and their ‘owner.’ The God of the Israelites did not exist in a luxurious mansion on the Mountain of Olympus; rather their God walked among them; caring for the weak; binding up the broken; and pursuing the strays. God was their Shepherd; and He ministered to the needs of His flock.

Now, you will find another kind of “shepherd” referenced in the biblical imagery. We should think of these “shepherds” as the lower-case shepherds—or what we might call “under-shepherds.” Under-shepherds were (are) those people called and assigned to care for God’s flock. These were the pastors or priests of God’s people. The word “pastor” is the Latin term for “shepherd,” so as your pastor, I would qualify as a lower-case shepherd, or an “under-shepherd” who carries the assignment to care for and look after God’s sheep, right?
Now, again, if you have read the Bible, you probably remember that human “under-shepherds” are regularly critiqued and even condemned by God through His prophets. Who can forget God’s scathing rebuke of “the shepherds of Israel” in Ezekiel 34: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? 3 You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. 4 The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. 5 So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; 6 they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

This sound condemnation of the “shepherds of Israel” may likely inform our text this morning. Remember that Jesus is speaking to Pharisees, those highly regarded religious leaders who may have been considered “shepherds of Israel” in Jerusalem. And let us also keep in mind God’s concern when He observes that His sheep are without a shepherd, “with no one to search or seek for them.” That is an important theme to keep in mind as we make our way through John 10.

Now, we know that Jesus continued the practice of assigning under-shepherd responsibilities to His disciples, and we see that most vividly in John 21 when three times our Lord charges Peter, “Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep.” Paul uses the same imagery in Acts 20 when he charges the elders in Ephesus, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

So, as we work our way through John 10, we will carefully try to discern when Jesus is referring to human under-shepherds as opposed to those times when He is referring to The Shepherd of God’s sheep, who is the LORD Himself.

Now, we’ve looked at the imagery of The Shepherd and the under-shepherds, but let us not overlook the imagery of the sheep! Who are the sheep? We are the sheep, right?

To be more specific, God’s people, and often God’s chosen nation called Israel, are consistently pictured as “the sheep of His pasture” in the Old Testament. Later on, as we’ve already observed, those called and saved by Jesus are also referred to “sheep” or “the flock.”

Church, to be honest, we should not think it too high of a compliment to be labeled, “sheep”! I would refer you to Phillip Keller’s book A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 where he describes the nature and habits of sheep. The overall thrust of his book is that sheep are utterly helpless creatures. Keller observes that among the animal kingdom, sheep are on the low end of intelligence and lack any practical means of self-defense. They are not fast, they cannot climb, their teeth are good only for chewing grass, and their hooves are good for little other than walking. Sheep are at the same time both timid and stubborn. As creatures of habit, they will follow paths through desolate places even though excellent forage is not far away. To thrive, and even survive, sheep are 100% absolutely dependent upon their shepherd. Such is why it is lamentable, dangerous, and a cause of deep concern for Jesus in Matthew 9:36 when he observes a crowd of people “who were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Now, if you are a modern, 21st century person who has been raised on secular humanism, you may be offended to think of yourself as a helpless, dependent sheep! Others of you may think of
yourself as a lion or a golden retriever or a beaver or an otter because some personality tests categorize people as certain kinds of “animals” in terms of personality traits and tendencies. But here is a biblical worldview, so beautifully captured in Isaiah 53:6, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way.”

Not only are we sheep, according to the Bible, but we are sheep who have turned away from the Shepherd. We have all gone astray. Which means people who are far from God are, in general, lost and vulnerable…like sheep without a shepherd.

Thankfully our Shepherd has not forgotten us, amen? In Luke 15, Jesus paints a picture of our LORD as the good shepherd who leaves the 99 on the hill to seek and save even one sheep that has gone astray. We will look deeper into the qualities of the Good Shepherd in the weeks to come. But for now, let us embrace and seek to understand the biblical worldview as we find it in the text: we, as human beings, are all sheep who have gone astray. We are in desperate need of a Shepherd who will care for us, lead us, feed us, and protect us. Once we are found and reunited with our Shepherd, we are part of His flock and under His care, though often we are led and cared for directly by those people the Shepherd assigns to serve as under-shepherds. That picture is important to understand, because Jesus is assuming the Jews and Pharisees whom He now addresses are familiar with that picture, OK? Let us now read the parable again which is the first 5 verses, and then we’ll quickly make some historical observations about sheep and shepherds before finishing with some interpretation of what this all means.

II. The Historical Assumptions about Sheep and Shepherds

Listen again now to the parable, and pay careful attention to the details: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Many of us have read this scripture a hundred times, but unless you understand something about the ancient practices of raising sheep, you’re going to miss out on some of the rich imagery and meaning in this text.

To begin with, we must understand the philosophy and endgame of “shepherding” in ancient Palestine. Unlike many modern sheep farms, the ancient Judaeans did not typically raise sheep to sell at the meat market. Most Jewish shepherds raised sheep for their wool, which means they cared for the same sheep from the time they were little lambs up until they were about 10-12 years old. Because of the longevity of the relationship, the shepherds would give each sheep a specific name…typically associated with its unique markings or even their aggravating behavior! Picture Snow White and the Seven Dwarves…Grumpy, Sneezy, Sleepy, Happy, Dopey…right? Keep in mind also that shepherds were typically born into the profession; so, like David the son of Jesse, the shepherd would begin caring for the sheep as a boy helping out his dad, and eventually become the “lead shepherd” when he was able to successfully establish a relationship with the sheep and defend them from predators and thieves. Also, contrary to those who “herd sheep” with horses and sheepdogs, the ancient shepherd of Palestine led the sheep…he went
before them and beckoned the sheep to follow him. That picture is incredibly important to properly understanding the Parable of the Shepherd and His Sheep.

Now, in the parable we heard Jesus refer to a sheepfold, a gatekeeper, and a door. Let’s unpack that for a bit.

First, you should know that there were two kinds of sheepfolds in the ancient middle east: the collective sheepfold in town, and the makeshift sheepfold in the wild. The first kind of sheepfold, the collective or community sheepfold, is what we find described in our parable this morning. Picture if you will a large corral constructed with 8-10 foot walls made of stone or tightly wound saplings with one gate or door that served as the only way in or out. Every village or town would have one of these collective, community sheepfolds that served not just one shepherd and his flock, but many shepherds and many flocks. We actually observed this kind of a collective sheepfold in Kenya amongst the Masai Tribe who make their living as shepherds this very day.

So here’s the picture: at the end of the day, shepherds from different pastures would bring their flocks to the collective sheepfold for safe keeping overnight while they went home for dinner and a good night’s rest. Once all of the sheep were safely inside, the door would be barred and protected by the night porter. The next morning, the shepherds would arrive to fetch their sheep and lead them out to pasture. The night porter, or the “gatekeeper,” knew the shepherds well, and only the shepherds were allowed to enter into the sheepfold to fetch their sheep. Anyone who tried to enter into the sheepfold by any means other than the door was a non-shepherd, which meant he was a thief and up to no good, right?

Now…you might be wondering how in the world the shepherd sorted his sheep out from all the other sheep. H. V. Morton tells of a scene that he saw in a cave near Bethlehem. Two shepherds had sheltered their flocks in the cave during the night. One of the shepherds stood some distance away and gave his peculiar call which his own sheep knew, and soon his whole flock had run to him, because they knew his voice. They would have come for no one else, but they knew the call of their own shepherd. Those of you who own hunting dogs understand this, right? You can order your dog to fetch and retrieve or stay or kennel, but your hunting buddies cannot get your dog to do anything, and it’s annoying to you and your dog when they try! My 6 year old German Shorthair Pointer named Molly listens to one voice and one voice only: MINE! I raised her from a pup, trained her, named her, and loved her every day for the past 6 years. She knows my voice and heeds my voice over all others. You cat people don’t understand this at all…let’s face it--cats listen to nobody.

OK, that’s enough historical context for now. I’ll return to the other kind of sheepfold next week, because it will be quite relevant for what Jesus says of Himself. But now that we have a little understanding of the biblical imagery of sheep and shepherds and a working knowledge regarding ancient middle-eastern shepherding, the collective sheepfold, and the sheep’s loyalty to their Shepherd, let us once again read the parable with new eyes to see and ears to hear:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his
own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Do you see how that parable now makes perfect sense? Jesus is not saying anything too terribly profound here. He simply reminds the Pharisees what all middle-eastern people in the ancient world already knew about shepherding. The question is: Why is Jesus telling the Pharisees and the skeptical Jews this story now? What’s the point He is trying to make? And how does that point translate into our current cultural moment and the cry of our own hearts? I will address these questions and more next Sunday. As the old, 1960’s Batman series ended each week, “Same bat time, same bat channel!”

This morning, however, I will conclude with only one observation:

**III. The Blind Thieves**

If you recall our story from John 9, a blind beggar has an encounter with Jesus. Jesus puts mud on his eyes, orders him to go to the pool of Siloam and wash, and the man gains his sight. He is immediately interrogated by first, his neighbors, and then the Pharisees. The man bears witness to Jesus and tells the truth about what happened. The Pharisees, the most religious people in town, reject his testimony. They insist that Jesus is a sinner; and when the former beggar defends Jesus, they excommunicate the healed man from the synagogue. He is cast out, banished, and they mock him as one “born into sin.” Then Jesus comes to the man again, and this time He reveals His true identity as the Son of Man. The one born blind who now sees falls to his knees and worships Jesus! Jesus then proclaims, “For judgement I have come into the world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”

Some of the Pharisees overheard what Jesus said, so they ask the question with contempt: “Are we also blind?” It is a rhetorical question. In their minds, they are clearly not blind. They are well educated, enlightened, highly respected, and ultra-moral. They are the powerbrokers in the religious world, and they are quite convinced that God has a special treat in store for people so serious about holiness and righteous living. I don’t know what they thought Jesus would say to their rhetorical question, but here’s what Jesus actually says: “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see’ your guilt remains. Truly, truly I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber…”

It seems to me that Jesus moves from declaring the Pharisees blind and guilty to then describing the Pharisees as the “thieves and robbers” in the parable. We’ll look deeper into what Jesus has to say about the thieves and robbers next week, but right now I want us to consider the circumstances that led this well-intentioned group of religiously devout people to fall under the category of “thieves and robbers.”

We get the sense that, had the Pharisees had the humility to confess their blindness; to admit their doubts; to ask for light from the Light of the World…if they humbled themselves and acknowledged their “sheep” status, they would not be guilty of thievery. However, since the Pharisees fancy themselves as leaders of the people…as those who can see better than most…and yet they have rejected the Shepherd, that leaves them only one place in the narrative: they are the blind; but even worse…they are thieves and robbers. They are the kind of false under-shepherds that the LORD opposes in Ezekiel 34. In Matthew 23 Jesus states: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, 3 so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the
works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, 6 and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. Thieves and robbers…and these men are “insiders.” They are “those who see” who have become blind to their own condition…and in their blindness, they have become destroyers of God’s sheep.

We will return to our Lord’s comparison between the thief and the shepherd next week, but for now, let me close by asking you a few questions: The Bible says we are all sheep; we have all gone astray; and apart from Jesus, we are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. How does that description strike you? Do you identify with feeling harassed and helpless? Do you know your Shepherd? Would you recognize His voice? Have you heard Him call you by name? Do you know there are others who would devour you for their own end…they are thieves and robbers…and they have destruction on their hearts. Some have come in the disguise of under-shepherds…they say all the right things, but they do not come through the Door who is Christ…they attempt to appeal to your allegiance by some other means. So, assuming you are a sheep, who are you following? Whose voice has your undivided attention? Would you know the difference between a good shepherd and a thief?

Here’s how you know. Jesus sums it up plainly in vs. 11: The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. So, who is the Good Shepherd? Who is your owner, your redeemer, your provider and your protector? Jesus said it plainly, “I am the Good Shepherd.”

Church, do not give your allegiance to thieves, or even to under-shepherds. I love you, and I would like to believe that I would lay my life down for you…but let’s face it: I am not your Shepherd. I am a poor excuse for an under-shepherd. I am fallen just like you; I too am a sheep who has gone astray. But Jesus saved me, called me and appointed me to shepherd you as His servant, so I would appeal to you as Paul appealed to the church in the first century: follow me as I follow Christ! Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and he laid down His perfect life for you! Jesus is the Door! Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life! Jesus is the Light of the World! Jesus is your Savior, and there is no other. Listen to His voice and follow Him. Do NOT follow a thief! Hold every voice, every thought captive to the teachings of the One who laid down his life for us all. Do not follow a thief…and there are so many thieves…so many competing voices who wish to entice you, enslave you, devour you, and persuade you. Look to your Shepherd, friends…He has come for you! Church, let us close by proclaiming together the identity of our Shepherd as we find it revealed in the 23rd Psalm:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
3 He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.
4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.