

SERMON
+ 4 Easter B
April 21, 2024

The scriptures are filled with sheep and shepherds.
Many of the scripture's greatest heroes
shepherded flocks of sheep.

Moses and David,
and the great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
all kept sheep.

But usually,
when the Old Testament scriptures
mention shepherds and sheep,
it isn't in such a literal sense,
but more as a metaphor.
They refer to the kings and leaders of Israel as shepherds,
and Israel as their flock.

That makes sense,
since the things a shepherd does for a flock of sheep
are the same things a king is called on to do for his people:
protect them from enemies and danger,
supply their basic needs, like food and water,
lead them and guide them in ways that benefit the whole flock,
and keep them together.

It's the prophets who use this metaphor the most –
the image of a shepherd for the kings and leaders of Israel.
But unfortunately, it's usually to criticize the king
for doing his job so poorly.

The prophets understood and explained
the scattering of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians
and the exile in Babylon
as God's judgement on Israel's faithlessness
and the failure of their shepherd kings.

In fact, in Ezekiel, (34)
God gets so frustrated with the kings
for being such bad shepherds
that he declares that he himself
will be their shepherd.
God would rule Israel.

All these images would come to the minds of the Pharisees,
to whom Jesus is speaking here,
when he declares himself to be the good shepherd –
the good king of Israel –
the provider and protector of his people,
the source of food and water – life-sustaining nourishment,
and the leader and unifier of his flock.

Which makes what he says here
a less-than-veiled indictment
against the leadership of these Pharisees
as the hired hands, who like the kings of old,
ruled poorly and scattered the sheep,
while he proclaims himself to be the presence of God
come to shepherd Israel, as promised.
And the Pharisees get it.

But for all those rich images,
the one thing that matters most to Jesus
is the one thing that he says
separates him as the good, model shepherd
from someone hired for the job,
and that is that he lays down his life for the sheep.
He says it five times in these eight verses.
He, the good shepherd,
lays down his life for the sheep.
Five times.

We who have read John's story
know what that looks like for Jesus.
In just three more chapters,
Jesus will kneel before his disciples
and wash their feet.

He lays down his life metaphorically
by yielding his rights and authority as their teacher
and kneeling before his disciples as a servant
to wash their feet.

He did that, he tells them,
to teach them about servanthood
and to set an example
for obeying his command to love one another.

But we also know that this metaphorical laying down of his life
also points ahead to the end of John's story
where he lays down his life literally,
and dies for them.
And for you and me.

Jesus fulfills his role as the good shepherd
in the most extreme and final way for us,
providing for and protecting us by his own breath and Spirit,
feeding us with the food and drink of life,
and leading us to the place prepared for us before God,
uniting us with one another, himself, and the Father.

So when Jesus says
the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep,
he's thinking not just about going to extremes to protect them
from the dangerous wolves of life by his death,
but more so about giving them the gift of life
as his intentional act to give his life.

Not many of us are called
to lay down our life in that literal sense.

But if Jesus is the good, or model shepherd,
and we are called to follow him,
and commanded to love one another as he has loved us,
and to serve and not to be served,
and by his resurrection, to be his body in the world
and agents of the love, life, and forgiveness he brings,
then we too are called to lay down our lives for others.

Jesus' footwashing
as a metaphor for laying down his life
is our example for our own laying down our lives,
when we, too, refuse to demand our rights
and remember, serve, or help others instead.

Then there are the little things
that happen each day – each moment –
that demand a choice,
or affect a relationship,
or depend on a priority,
or even define your next step.

In those situations, our natural inclination
is to choose what's best for ourselves,
to consider the easy way,
or the selfish way
or the way everybody does it.

But if, in those everyday moments,
you chose instead to do the right thing,
the thing you knew was God's desire for you,
the thing that was best for the whole flock,
you, too, would be laying down your life for others.

These are ways that we, like the good shepherd, Jesus,
lay down our lives
and bring life, show love, and forgive others.

And note that they all reflect the integrity of word and action –
when what one says is also what one does.
That is one of the things that sets Jesus apart, too,
as the good shepherd.

Love. Believe. Forgive. Follow me.
All these commands are from Jesus,
and all of them are about doing something,
not just thinking or saying something.

Not insisting on our rights.

Doing the right thing.

Saying and doing the same thing.

Those are some ways we can lay down our life,
like the good shepherd.

And in that way, be his faithful sheep.