

“I Have Come That They May Have Life”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning John 10:1-10 and Psalm 23  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
on May 7, 2017

*The Lord is our shepherd; we shall not want. I am the good shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep. He makes us lie down in green pastures. I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly. He leads us beside still waters. I have other sheep that are not of this fold. He restores our souls.*

There are lots of references in the Bible to God as shepherd and us as sheep. I think every sermon I’ve ever heard about the Good Shepherd has included an educational lesson for us city folk about shepherding—namely, how dumb sheep are. Which, frankly, warms my heart with about as much inspiration as a bad report card. So, I’m sorta thinking it’s time we challenged that narrative. What do you say?

To help us flip the script is Professor Jenny Morton, a neuroscientist at the University of Cambridge who took seven Welsh Mountain sheep through a series of tests to examine their intelligence. She says, “[Sheep] have a reputation for being extremely dim and their flock behavior backs that up as they are very silly animals when in a group—if there is a hole they will fall into it . . . So I didn’t expect them to be so amenable to testing and certainly didn’t expect them to be so smart.” Professor Morton discovered that “sheep can perform executive cognitive tasks that have never been shown to exist in any other large animals apart from monkeys.”<sup>i</sup>

Want further proof? Farmers in West Yorkshire reported flocks of sheep with problem solving skills after the animals found they could cross cattle grids by rolling on their backs. Wouldn’t you have loved to witness that? Professor Morton says, “Sheep are quite intelligent animals—they seem to be able to recognize people and even respond when you call their name.”<sup>iii</sup>

Of course, Morton wasn’t the first person to notice sheep smarts. Jesus said it just as plainly, “The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out . . . His sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger.”

So, now that we’ve cleared up that little misunderstanding and determined that we sheep are, in fact, quite smart, let’s try to keep it that way, okay? It is crucial to our intelligence that we recognize when we’re being duped, wouldn’t you say? Perhaps you already know that some who say, “Follow me,” are not to be trusted—that there is the good shepherd and then there is a whole host of counterfeit shepherds.

Perhaps you are aware that there are those who will feign leadership only to lead the lambs to slaughter. Perhaps you have seen such false leadership in recent times. They pretend to be for the people, but they come to kill, steal, and destroy. They do not enter through the gate—they must rush to get to their prey before Jesus can call his people to a different way. So they enter by climbing the fence, violating your boundaries; they are sneaky, manipulative and dishonest. They are neither fair nor forthright; they take shortcuts. They rarely call you by name because they have not taken the time to know your name.

They do not have the voice of Jesus, but they often know how to co-opt Jesus' words. How are we to discern between the voice of truth and the voice of fraud? And is it not desperately important in times such as these that we know how to tell the difference?

A litmus test: Does this shepherd come offering life—abundant life—not just for some but for all? Is the one who wants you to follow him willing to lay down his life for the sheep? Is he willing to take personal risks for the sake of others? If the answer is no, he might just be a hired hand—that is, one who can be bought for a price, one who values the paycheck or the position but not the sheep, one who will run when the wolves appear, one for whom self-preservation is the highest value.

I do not know whether in our world today we are experiencing a crisis of leadership or a crisis of follow-ship. As the Rev. Dr. William Barber asked this week at the Alliance of Baptists: Where are the ones who will follow Jesus instead of Caesar? Rev. Barber reminded us not only of the words of Jesus, but also the words of the prophet Ezekiel. Listen close and see if the Old Testament is still relevant:

“There is a conspiracy of her princes within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her. Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things . . . Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain. Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations. They say, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says’—when the Lord has not spoken. The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the foreigner, denying them justice. “I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land . . .” (Ezekiel 22)

What would Ezekiel say to us today? Would he even need to alter the script? Where are the ones who will protect God's vulnerable sheep from the wolves today? Where are the ones who will follow the shepherd, even through the valley of the shadow of death? Will we find enough moral courage to follow the God who hunts down the lost and the lonely to gather them into the fold? To follow the God who welcomes the outcast, the poor, the refugee, and the hungry? Will we follow the God who sets the captive free, who heals the sick even when they can't afford it?

Jesus expects sheep to be wise and discerning. “My sheep,” he says, “know my voice and follow me.” Being sheep does not mean being clueless or helpless. Sheep means you are called, called to follow. You are called to recognize the voice of truth and resist the voice of fraud.

You are asked to be sheep, not wolves. You do not prey on others, do not turn on your brother, do not practice the type of cannibalism that feeds on the labor of the hungry to fatten the self. By God, you are sheep, and that doesn't mean weak or ignorant or passive or slow. What if it means you are nonviolent and brave? What if it means you will walk through the darkest valley with your sisters and brothers just because God asks you to? What if it means you will fear no evil? You might *feel* afraid, but you won't be so afraid as to abandon the flock and save yourself. What if being sheep means *believing* Jesus when he says he has sheep who are not of this fold? Can you imagine having the courage to believe we're not it? That there's more? That we're not the chosen ones? We're just some of the flock and God loves each and every one.

Maybe to be sheep means we are treasured by God, held by God, led by God, known by name. Maybe to be sheep is to understand this miracle of a God who would desert the ninety-nine in search of the one—not because God has stopped caring about the ninety-nine but because the shepherd expects us to take care of one another while he’s gone.

After all, we’re not dumb sheep. We are sheep who have been given abundant life to share and the wisdom to know how to share it. Jesus has shown us the way to life. Jesus has shown us what compassion looks like, feels like, sounds like. Jesus has shown us how to love our neighbors, how to care for the sick and feed the hungry, how to bind up the broken-hearted, how to speak truth to power, how to rise up from the grip of death and live.

Look, I know sometimes it feels like God has forgotten us or like other people get to hear God’s voice, yet for you the heavens are silent. But I stand here today to remind you: God has already come. If the heavens are empty, it is because God is down in the slum among the poor. If the heavens sound empty, it is because God is down in the prison and detention centers weeping with the prisoners and plotting a jailbreak. If the heavens are empty, it is because God is on the hunt for a lost and lonely child in need of deliverance.

If you cannot hear Jesus, follow him anyway. The path is already beating in your heart. You know when the way ahead is of God because the way always looks like compassion and smells like freedom. You know it is the way of God because it is the road on which everyone shares resources. It is the journey where believers meet together, break bread together, eat with glad and generous hearts, praising God and honoring the goodwill of all people, where day by day the Lord adds to their number those who are being saved.

Whether it ever *feels* like God speaks to you or not, you already know the voice of Jesus. As the prophet Ezekiel said, there are people who say they have heard from God when God has not spoken. In reality God has already spoken plenty—most especially in the person of Jesus Christ—and we will spend a lifetime learning how to follow what we already know to be true.

Jesus tells us not only that he is the shepherd, but also that he is the gate and the gatekeeper. Too often we have mistaken that gate to be about who gets into heaven when that is not the story Jesus told. The story Jesus told was about a God, a gate, a keeper, a shepherd who protects the life of his sheep from the predators who wish to steal, kill, and destroy. It is a story about a God who knows you by name. It is a story about listening for the voice of truth and following it all the days of your life.

May we hold fast to the promise of abundant life for everyone. Though the valley be dark and the way lined with liars and thieves, may Jesus lead us and mercy follow behind us. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Gray, “Sheep Are Far Smarter than Previously Thought,” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/8335465/Sheep-are-far-smarter-than-previously-thought.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Gray