

## **The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life for His Sheep**

John 10:11,15,17

A sermon for Shepherd Sunday

Every year the fourth Sunday of Easter is Shepherd Sunday. The texts for the day include the Twenty-Third Psalm and a portion of the tenth chapter of Gospel of John on the Good Shepherd.

We are familiar with other such places, for example, Isaiah 53:6 which says: "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Or the thirty-fourth chapter of Ezekiel about the Lord as the Good Shepherd, and how it warns pastors who do not do what they are supposed to do.

There is a picture that hangs in many churches of Christ knocking on the door. The artist Warner Sallman also painted a well-known head of Christ. Although we really do not know what Jesus looked like, we know that he was called "the Good Shepherd." You may wonder: Why now in this Easter season?

Why now? How does the Lord, who is Lord of Lords (Deuteronomy 10:17, Psalm 136:3, 1 Timothy 6:15, Revelation 17:14, and 19:16), relate to: "I am the good shepherd"? What is the relationship between these two titles? And why this text at this time?

We are very familiar with the Twenty-Third Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd...." The lectionary readings are on a three-year cycle. The first year deals with the first part of John 10 where it says: "I am the good shepherd." The second year deals with the second part: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The third year deals with the section which says: "No one can take my sheep out of my hands and no one can take the sheep out of my father's hands."

Then comes the conundrum: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). What does that mean? It could mean that Jesus and the Father have agreed on things to be done. But those who were there in John 10 knew that there is something bigger at stake.

Right before this, it says there was a division among the Jews. "Many of them said: 'He has a demon, and he is mad. Why listen to him?' Others said, 'These are not the sayings of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'" (John 10:19-21).

C.S. Lewis wrote about this and pointed out: Either Jesus was crazy, or he was the Christ. There is no in between. We can't say: Let's consider other options.

After this text which ends: "I and the Father are one," it says once again the Jewish leaders objected: What you are saying is blasphemy! And the punishment for blasphemy according to Jewish law is to be stoned to death. They started to pick up stones to put him to death.

He says to them: "Is it not written in your laws: 'I said, you are gods?'" He quotes Psalm 82:6: "You are gods, all of you." And adds: "And scripture cannot be broken." Which means: Look it up! If scripture says: "You are gods, all of you," how can you accuse me of blasphemy? We are all gods. The Jewish leaders are confused. Their efforts to trap him are not going well.

This text is really not about shepherds. It is really about the Trinity. It is about the big question. It is about salvation. What is salvation? This is not a word game, or a head trip, or a Bible game. This is about: Is there real salvation? How? Where? What do we do about this?

We confess the Nicene Creed, which was developed at the meeting of church leaders in 325 A.D. at Nicea and again in 381 in Constantinople. That is three hundred years after Christ. You ask: What took them so long?

It is not that simple. Are you going to vote on it? Take a survey and then decide about the Trinity? This is not the way to deal with such questions. Or you may say: "We take what the Bible says." Why then did it take the church three hundred years? Couldn't they read their Bibles? Were they stupid?

What does it say, not only in the section on blasphemy in John 10:34-35, but also in Psalm 82:6 where it states: "You are gods . . . all of you."

In the same Gospel, John 14:28, it describes Jesus as saying: "The Father is greater than I." What does that mean? That Jesus is less than the Father?

Earlier in John 8:58 Jesus says: "Before Abraham was, I am." "I am" is obviously a claim to be God (Exodus 3:14).

What about Matthew 28:19 where it says to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"? And for that matter, also 1 Cor 8:6: "There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist"?

But then there are other places that seem to say something quite different. For example, Paul writing in 1 Cor 15:28: "the Son submits himself to the Father."

How does the Trinity work? It is important to remember that such issues are not settled by counting verses. We do not say: Jesus is God. Rather, we say: God is Jesus. It makes all the difference. That is what the Nicene Creed is about: "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father." The key is the phrase: "Of one Being with the Father." It does not say: "Of the same Being," or "of equal Being." But "of one Being."

It is really a question of what salvation is about. The problem is that the common way of thinking is to say that there is "godness." And then it's up to us to decide if Jesus qualifies to be God. And then for that matter Allah, Krishna, and whatever else. We will see if they qualify. We say Jesus qualifies; he is God. But as Psalm 82:6 says: "You are gods . . . all of you."

Over against that common thinking is the Nicene Creed: God is Jesus. As the great Athanasius said in that fourth century battle at Nicea: He was true God to SAVE us and true man to save US. This is about salvation.

It comes down to saying: Everything depends on the cross and resurrection. Or to stay in the Gospel of John: "Jesus says, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me'" (John 14:6). This is like the Nicene Creed: "of one Being with the Father." God is Jesus.

Do you understand it? If you say you understand it, then you have misunderstood it. Because this is the scandal of the cross and resurrection. The scandal has two parts, which Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 1:21-25 as foolishness and wisdom: "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe."

Stephen Hawking, a brilliant scientist and perhaps the most famous scientist of his time, was also an avowed atheist. He said we do not need God because science offers a more convincing explanation of everything that is. Despite Hawking's scientific expertise, he is a modern example of "the wisdom of this world" that Paul writes about in 1 Cor 1:21-25.

We who hold to what the Nicene Creed holds confess that the Infinite One who made everything – including everything that Stephen Hawking thought about – that

Infinite One became a human being about 4 B.C. He walked among us and he died. How can the Infinite One do this?! This is, however, only a small part of the scandal.

The bigger scandal is spelled out by a verse that Luther often quoted from Paul: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). The bigger scandal is that holiness, the one who is truly holy, took on sin and death, our sin and death. And because we are caught in sin and death, we have no way of grasping this. We are helpless because we are caught in sin and death. But he took on our sin and death in order that we might have the righteousness of God.

Luther calls this the best business deal that ever was. Christ took our sin and death; we take his eternal life and holiness. The promise is that we are made his in baptism: "If we have been united with him in a death like his" (Baptism), we shall **certainly** be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). As we know, the Greek idiom requires the word "certainly." That means that for those who are in him, there is that "**certainty.**"

As we gather for the Lord's Supper in the receiving of the bread and wine, we have this **certainty**. He comes to keep us in his life forever. Amen.