John 10:1-18 *His Name Is… The Good Shepherd*

***Maybe I Should Get a Serta***

I had a difficult time falling asleep a few nights ago, so I tried counting sheep.

Any of you ever count sheep? How do you do it? I mean, how do you picture the sheep? I suppose that one way to do it is to try to picture a big flock of sheep in a pen and then count them as they mill about. That would probably be the most natural way to count sheep, and it would probably tire your brain out enough to help you fall asleep. Or, I suppose you could try to picture a bunch of sheep all in a row and then just count down the line. Those are ways of counting sheep that make sense, but that's not how I do it.

When I can't sleep and I decide to count sheep I picture a fence. It’s not a big fence. Just two posts with two bars in between. And then I picture sheep which are cute and cuddly and run up to the fence and jump over it. I count them as, one by one, they hop over my fence. **Like this** (and I don’t think I am alone in this; when I googled images of “counting sheep” almost all of them were pictures of sheep hopping fences.

I don’t know why I count sheep this way. Really, I ought to be counting deer or bunny rabbits. But if it can help me fall asleep, who’s to argue?

Well, anyway, this time the picture in my mind was a little bit more detailed than usual. This time I included a shepherd in my imagination. And, as my little, imaginary sheep came bounding over the fence, they did something strange. Some of them walked up to the shepherd and stayed with him, while others walked right by.

As I lay in bed watching these sheep, I started to think about our passage today and it occurred to me that this is what Jesus is describing in John 10. I don't think the sheep Jesus is talking about do much fence-hopping, but they must make a choice. They must decide if they will follow the shepherd, or if they will walk on by.

***Jehovah Rohi***Let me pause here and remind you of our series. We are in our preparation for Christmas and we are doing a series called *His Name Is…* Our anchor verse is **Psalm 9:10** which says:

Those who know your name will trust in you.

The idea is that God’s names reveal something about his nature and character, and the more we know His nature and character the more we’ll love and trust in Him. And so we have been looking at some of the different names God is known by in the Bible, and we are also looking at how they connect to Christmas.

And the name we are going to look at today is **Jehovah Rohi**. I think that’s how you pronounce it. Jehovah Rohi. In Hebrew, these are the first two words of Psalm 23: **“The Lord is my Shepherd.”**

This is one of the most beloved names, and word pictures, for God in the Bible. Israel was a very agrarian society, major Biblical characters from Abraham to Moses to David are involved in sheep herding at one point or another, and the image of a shepherd tenderly caring for a vulnerable, cuddly sheep is comforting and encouraging. And, of course, one of the most well-known Psalms in the Bible is **Psalm 23:**

**1**The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
**2**    He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
**3**    he refreshes my soul.  
He guides me along the right paths  
    for his name’s sake.  
**4**Even though I walk  
    through the darkest valley,  
I will fear no evil,  
    for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
    they comfort me.

There is hardly a Christian funeral that I attend where this Psalm is not read. We love the picture of God shepherding us with tender care, making sure that we lack nothing that we truly need. The picture of Him leading us into quiet, park-like settings where we can safely eat and drink. The picture of Him walking right beside us even through the darkest valleys—yeah, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—using his rod and staff to protect us from evil; it is a beautiful word picture. A lot of people have Psalm 23 memorized.

It can be a little misleading, however. A lot of us have sentimentalized this picture of sheep herding. We have a soft, almost wimpy view of what it means to be a shepherd. Almost like my picture of sheep jumping over the fence, we tend to picture God as our shepherd cuddling lambs in His arms like so many stuffed animals.

But shepherding was difficult, manly, and sometimes dangerous work. The other Old Testament passage that calls God a shepherd and stands out to me is **Isaiah 40:10-11**, and it shows us that this is not a soft picture of God:

**10**See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,  
    and he rules with a mighty arm.  
See, his reward is with him,  
    and his recompense accompanies him.

Stop here a second. 20 some years ago I was in an Old Testament class at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and our professor, Ray Ortlund, Jr., took us through Isaiah 40. He said this verse is a picture of God like an action movie hero. That we should picture God here like a muscle-bound warrior. He said Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger. That’s kind of dated now.

But that line: “he rules with a mighty arm” reminds me of a scene from one of the Fast and Furious movies where Dwayne “the Rock” Johnson is in a hospital room with a plaster cast on his arm. He gets word that some disaster is taking place and he says a cheesy line like “Time for Daddy to go to work” and then he flexes his arm and the plaster cast just explodes off of him.

That’s how we’re supposed to picture God here. He comes with power. He rules with a mighty arm. But then, look at verse 11:

**11**He tends his flock like a shepherd:  
    He gathers the lambs in his arms  
and carries them close to his heart;  
    he gently leads those that have young.

This same mighty warrior…this God with bulging biceps and cut lats…gently takes lambs in his arms and cradles them to his chest.

So, this picture of God as shepherd is a picture of provision and tender care—but it is not a soft picture of God. This is a warrior God who can lead us through the dark valleys and defeat our enemies.

And the title of shepherd—the good shepherd—is a title Jesus claims for Himself. Our main text this morning is going to be John 10:1-18. Here Jesus is going to identify Himself as the One Good Shepherd whom we should trust in and follow. He’s going to tell us that He is the One voice, the One gate, and the One who cares.

***The Call***

So, first, Jesus is the **one voice** we should listen to. **John 10:1-6:**

 1"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. 2The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. 3The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." 6Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

This is almost an essay on first-century sheep farming.

As I understand it, in the ancient near east the sheep farmers of a village would keep all their sheep in a common pen. Then, at daybreak, the shepherds would come to lead their flocks out to pasture. The night watchman would open the gate and each shepherd would take a position outside the enclosure and begin to sound out their own peculiar calls--some shepherds would even call out the names of their sheep--until the flocks had all responded and gathered around their own shepherd.

This is what Jesus is describing here. The sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd and they follow it. But a stranger’s voice will startle them, and they will run away.

This is how it is with Jesus and His church. He is the shepherd and Christians--the elect, the chosen, all who have been set apart to believe on His name--make up His flock. He says that He knows His sheep and His sheep know Him (v. 14). He says that His sheep listen to His voice and follow Him (v. 27).

In a world where there is a multitude of voices calling out for our allegiance--from false religions to political parties to the stock market and the internet and so on--Christ's call rings out and those who belong to His flock hear and follow it.

Our task, of course, is to listen for Jesus’ voice. To filter out all the false voices that are trying to get our attention and listen for His call.

***The Gate***

But the people listening don’t understand what Jesus is saying. Maybe they didn’t like the implication that they were sheep. Believe me, it’s not a compliment. So Jesus gives another image. He tells us He is the **One Gate** we must enter in. **Verses 7-10:**

7Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Now, like I said, being compared to sheep is not exactly a compliment. Let me give you a sheep story. The one sheep story I have.

When I was in seminary, I did a summer internship at a church outside of Aplington, IA. It was a church in between pastors, so I came and lived in their parsonage for a summer and preached every week. And this was a church out in the countryside, so it was the church, the parsonage, and the cemetery. And there was some pastureland there that the church was renting to a farmer.

So anyway, this farmer puts some sheep in the pasture. And he was weaning them. It was the first time they had been separated from their mothers. So every night, when we’re trying to go to sleep, these dumb sheep stand right under our window and just holler. You know, we teach our kids that sheep make a nice gentle sound: “Baaa”. But it’s not like that. They sound much more like angry three-year-olds throwing a temper tantrum: “MAAAA! MAAA!”

But that’s not the story. One day, one of these sheep gets out. So I call the farmer and he comes over and I go out to help him wrangle this lost sheep. So we sort of get the sheep in the pasture to huddle in a corner and then we open the gate and we try to move this escaped sheep toward it.

And this sheep, he wants to be with his buddies, he sees where they are, but instead of heading to the open gate he just tries to go right through the fence. I mean, like, repeatedly, he just keeps running full speed into this fence. Over and over again.

I decided that day that sheep are not very smart.

But the point, of course, is that there was only one way in and out of that pasture. On the one side, the sheep was scared and alone and frightened. There were trucks rumbling down the road and scary looking preachers and farmers. On the other side were his friends and thick, rich grass for eating. And the sheep wanted to be on the inside. But he was only going to get there through the gate.

That’s what Jesus is saying. "I am the gate for the sheep" Jesus says, "whoever enters through me will be saved."

I’ve read that sometimes, when the sheep were spending the night out on the range, shepherds would build a little pen to keep them together, and then they would sleep right in the opening. They would literally make themselves the gate, keeping the sheep in and the predators out.

Jesus came to give us life, life to the full. A life of green pastures and cooling drink and utter safety. A good life inside the protective fence of His care. But there’s only one way in. We have to trust in Jesus. We have to believe in Him.  
  
***The Sacrifice***

So Jesus is the One voice and the One gate. Now, He says explicitly what He has been implying throughout this chapter. He is the Good Shepherd. He is **the One who cares**. **Verses 11-13:**

 11"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. 13The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

Jesus is not a thief or robber who skulks in the back way and tries to carry the sheep away. He isn’t a stranger whose voice scares the sheep. He’s not even a hired hand, who is only there to collect a pay check. He is the shepherd. The one who owns the sheep. He’s the one who cares.

Now, think about the contrast Jesus makes here. To the hired hand, sheep-tending is just a job. He can take it or leave it. He doesn't have anything invested and he isn't attached to the sheep. So when the wolves show up and it becomes a question of his own life or the life of the sheep, he's going to pick his own life. He can always get another job, no paycheck is worth risking death. Why face down a pack of hungry wolves just to protect someone else's sheep? The hired hand is going to run.

But for the shepherd who is an owner-operator, things are different. His whole life is tied up in the success or failure of his flock. He’s invested. These sheep are precious to him. If a sheep gets sick after hours, the owner-operator doesn’t have the option of saying he’s off-the-clock. If the wolves show up, he can’t just duck for cover. He’s going to go out there and fight for his sheep. As Jesus says, He’ll even give up His life if He has to.

The difference is that the hireling loves his life more than the sheep, but Jesus loves His sheep more than His life. He is the one who cares.

One of the things that happens when we talk about God as our shepherd is we often spend a lot of time talking about the foibles of the sheep. Right? If God is the shepherd, then in that metaphor, we are sheep, and sheep need a lot of help. I’ve already done that with my story about the sheep running into the fence. Sheep are dumb. We’re sheep. Ha ha.

And that’s true enough. But the emphasis here is not on the low IQ of the sheep but on the incredible love of the shepherd. **Verses 14-15:**

14"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Jesus keeps saying it: “I lay down my life for the sheep.” He’s talking about the cross, of course. He’s predicting His own death. And He’s saying, right up front, that it won’t be an accident. No one will take His life from Him (v. 18), not Judas, not Pilate, not Herod, not the Roman guards. They have their role, but what happens to Jesus is quite intentional on His part.

He’s going to the cross to take on the wolves and thieves of sin and guilt and shame. He’s going to take on the sentence of death that we deserve.

It’s ironic, really. One of the main purposes of sheep in that culture were to serve as guilt offerings—sacrifices. The way to atone for your sin before God was to sacrifice a sheep. But now Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is telling us that He will sacrifice Himself on the sheep’s behalf.

This is no soft picture of a sentimental shepherd. This is the warrior with bulging biceps facing down our greatest enemies.

***What Good is a Dead Shepherd?***

But now, if the story ended here, there would be a great problem. What good is a dead shepherd? The sheep are still going to be pretty helpless if they are wandering alone in the wilderness.

The story doesn't end with a mangled shepherd lying bloody and torn among the dead wolves, though. **Verses 16-18:**

16I 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. 17The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

When Jesus came into the world to save his sheep from sin and death and judgment, He came with a command from His Father in heaven. The command was that He should die for sinners and rise again. And with the command came the authority to do it. "I have authority to lay down my life," Jesus says, "and I have authority to take it up again."

He decided by his own authority when he would give himself into the jaws of sin and death and judgment. And after He had lain among the slain for three days He alone had the authority to take back His life again.

But not only that; the sheep now have a shepherd. Christianity is not merely being saved from sin and death and judgment; it also means having a living shepherd to guide you and feed you and heal you and protect you and help you love.

Jesus says the same kind of relationship that exists between His Father and Himself is available to those who know Him as shepherd.

More than that, Jesus has many more sheep to bring in. Verse 16 says that Jesus didn’t just come into the world to lay down his life for a few Jewish disciples in Palestine. He has other sheep that are not of that sheep fold. He has sheep in Antioch and Athens and Rome and Cairo and London and New York and Mexico City and Sao Paulo and Tokyo and Manila and Sydney and Singapore and Paris and Beijing and Calcutta and Kiev and Teheran and Moscow and Sioux Falls and Ruthven and Spirit Lake and Spencer and all over the world.

And He is not in the grave waiting to see if some hired hand might come and tend those sheep. He is the living Shepherd, the good owner-operator, triumphant over death, and with authority over all the world to gather His own sheep from all the peoples of the world.

***Where’s Christmas?***Now, you might be asking: Where’s Christmas in all of this? What’s the connection to Jesus being born in Bethlehem?

And you might think: well, there are shepherds in the Christmas story. So that must be the connection. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and angels announced His birth to shepherds.

But that’s not it. I don’t think Jesus calling Himself the good shepherd has anything to do with who visited Him in the stable.

Instead, I see the Christmas connection in **verse 10.** We need to go back to verse 10, because this is a very important verse:

10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Do you see what Jesus says there? “I have come.” That’s the Christmas connection. This is why Jesus came into the world. This is His purpose, His mission. “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

Who gets life? His sheep.

Jesus’ mission at Christmas, His reason for coming, is so that He can have happy sheep. Sheep who lack for nothing. Sheep who drink beside quiet waters. Sheep who lie down in green pastures. Sheep who pass safely through the valley of the shadow of death. Sheep who are cradled gently in his powerful, mighty arms.

Life to the full. The King James Version of this verse says: “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” A full life. An abundant life.

This is about more than just getting a ticket stamped for heaven. Jesus isn’t talking about just giving us more time to fill. He’s talking about giving us our scarcely imagined best life; our most significant and meaningful life; the richest, brightest, completest life possible.

Indestructible life.  
Life that never dies.  
Life that is full and never empty.  
Life that is blessing.  
Life that is joy.  
  
Life that is abundant.  
  
***Do You Know Him?***

And so, the utterly crucial question for each of us this morning is this: Are we His sheep? Are you one of Christ's sheep today?

When I lie in my bed tonight and count my little fence-hopping sheep, in which group will you be? Those who go to the shepherd and follow Him, or those who walk on by?

Is Jesus your Good Shepherd? Do you hear His voice? Have you entered through the gate into the pasture He offers? Do you know He is the one who cares for you more than any other?

He claims to be the Good Shepherd. He has laid down His life and taken it up again. He is calling to Himself a flock of sheep from every tribe and tongue and nation in the world. Do you hear His voice?