

*"The Good Shepherd"* based on 1 John 3:16-20, Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18

Delivered on August 15, 2021 by Rev. Dr. Cheni Konje

There have been many studies done regarding the effect that animals have on our health and well-being. Watching beautiful fish swim in tanks tends to have a calming effect on people. Some studies have shown that observing the fish can help to focus the mind. Many pet owners often claim that it is easier for them to get along with their pets than it is to communicate with their fellow human beings. While some people have only recently acquired pets, others have loved and cared for various animals their whole life long. Behavioral scientists claim that in caring for a puppy or a kitten, children can develop empathetic feelings for others.

As a person becomes acquainted with a pet, the pet also develops familiarity with its owner. When a dog hears the voice of the person that loves and cares for it, or that sees their best friend approaching, there is much joy displayed in the wagging of its tail and through excited barking. When we were in college in Nebraska, our friend asked if Eleanor, the 8 ½ ft long boa constrictor, could live in our apartment with my sister and me. Mark, who we fondly claim as our American brother, was not allowed to keep his new pet in the dormitory on campus. We could tell that our American brother was coming up to our apartment because Eleanor would stick her tongue out, taste the air and make a beeline for the front door. The boa would rise up to 3 ft by the door, with the rest of her body slithered across the carpet.

For humans, we often think of recognizing the person whom one loves, and who loves the other in return, as a visual experience. People are also able to recognize someone that they know by the speech patterns of the other. Getting to know the way in which a person speaks develops over the time in which people become intimately acquainted with each other. For instance married couples, people who are dating, close friends and even siblings often finish each other's sentences as they are conversing with others. Has that ever happened to you?

A loved one's face or gait as he or she walks toward a cherished friend triggers the synapses in the brain that tell a person that they know the individual. In order to have this type of recognition, one needs to have the ability to see. A blind person does not have the benefit of visual cues. Along with their walking canes, they rely on touch, sound and a person to lead them.

The passage that we read this morning is preceded by the story of Jesus healing the man who had been blind from birth. The Pharisees had questioned Jesus about why he cured the man on the Sabbath. Following that miracle, Jesus had tried to explain that he was the gate through which the sheep would enter the sheepfold. In this morning's Scripture, Jesus switches the metaphor that he had used to clarify his role. He tells the disciples that he is the good shepherd. Like many Jews living in Israel while he was on earth, Jesus spoke in Greek. The first thing that we notice when we study the passage is that Jesus unites his mission with that of God the Father. He says *εγώ είμαι*, I AM, the same words that God used when he revealed himself to Moses. The word "*καλός*" that he used is often translated as "good". The meaning conveyed by

that word ranges from something that is ordered, to true, model, ideal, competent, faithful and praiseworthy. Jesus is the Faithful Shepherd in whom the sheep can trust. They will be fed and cared for, led to cool, clean living water and protected from the evil one who threatens to harm them. Jesus even laid down his life for the sheep.

Some people take offense at the notion of being referred to as sheep. Sheep are thought to blindly follow without question. According to theologian Nancy R. Blakely, the myth about the stupidity of sheep was started by cattle ranchers because sheep behave in a different manner than cows. However, if we compare cows to sheep, one notices that cows move along when they hear loud shouts or when they are prodded from behind. Cows can be pushed to move against their will. Sheep, on the other hand, prefer to be led. Sheep will not wander where their trusted shepherd does not go first to assure them that everything will be all right. These animals develop a special relationship with their shepherd. Their ears are tuned to listen to the voice of the one who leads them out to pasture, and in the evening brings them back to the corral.

Beloved, we are the sheep of Christ's pasture and through Bible study and worship, Christian fellowship and mission we strive to follow the voice of Jesus. We have developed a special way of speaking with the Good Shepherd, and we exercise it through prayer. Our calling in life is to tune our ears to the Word of God. There are so many voices in society today that threaten to drown out the truth of the Gospel. Pressure from our neighborhood associations may tell us that they will report us to the city if our yards are untidy. Some people use the excuse of having to mow the lawn on a Sunday morning rather than attend worship. Others will claim that this is the only day on which they can sleep in. I wonder what they would do if you were to suggest that we could start an evening service which they attend instead of coming at 10 AM.

Jesus also tells us that there are other sheep that we may not recognize as belonging to this fold. In his discourse with the disciples Jesus uses the image of being in the role of shepherd of the sheep. It was a shameful thing to be called a shepherd in Jesus' day. Shepherds were considered to be shiftless, low class hooligans who would as soon steal from you as watch the sheep. It was quite shocking and offensive that Jesus referred to himself as a shepherd. Once again Nancy Blakely suggests that the modern day equivalent for that would be Jesus calling himself a migrant worker. Our community here in Absecon has lost a lot of jobs. I have learned from many of you about the glass factories and employment opportunities that existed through places such as the Seabrook food-processing plant. Those jobs have moved elsewhere, and it often makes me sad that people in other areas of the country look to blame migrant workers and immigration for the loss earning potential. If we are gut level honest with ourselves, we can see that there just aren't as many jobs here. The factories have closed.

We continue to struggle against other things in our society that threaten to tear our families apart, such as the drug and gang cultures that seem to be on the rise. How will we, as Christians, respond to the violence and destruction that this way of life brings? How can we better address the needs of our youth and young adults?

The Good, Faithful and Praiseworthy Shepherd is at work completing the redemptive work of God the Father. He is still calling his sheep by name through pastors who preach God's Word and through ministers or congregation members who go out into the world after being fed in the House of the Lord. We may not have grown up in the same house or gone to the same church or high school with these new sheep. They may not look the same as you and me, and perhaps they don't speak the same language that we do. However, if they heed the voice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they too belong to the fold. The Lord is going to continue to bring them to his pasture because he loves the world, not just us but the entire world. The question for all of us is this: how will we reach out to the margins of society so that we can receive these brothers and sister in Christ? To whom are we being sent to extend a welcome to this Sheepfold of God?

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord endures forever. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

John 10: 11-18 (NRSV) I am the *good* shepherd. The good shepherd *lays* down his life for the sheep. The hired *hand*, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, *sees* the *wolf coming* and *leaves* the sheep and runs away—and the wolf *snatches* them and *scatters* them. The hired hand *runs* away because a *hired* hand does not *care* for the sheep. I am the good *shepherd*. I know my own and my own know me, just as the *Father* knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my *life* for the sheep. I have other *sheep* that do not *belong* to this *fold*. I must *bring* them also, and they will *listen* to my *voice*. So there will be one *flock*, one shepherd. For this *reason* the Father *loves* me, because I lay down my life in *order* to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I *lay* it down of my own *accord*. I have power to lay it down, and I have *power* to take it up again. I have *received* this *command* from my Father.