

I AM the good shepherd and the gate
Sermon four in the series: "I AM... the transforming promises of our Savior"

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Text: John 10:1-18

Theme: The good shepherd knows, nurtures, and protects his sheep so they can become what they were created to be.

A shepherd was herding his flocks in a remote pasture when suddenly a new Jeep Grand Cherokee flashes out of a dust cloud toward him. The driver, a young man in a Brioni suit, Gucci shoes, Ray Ban sunglasses, and a YSL tie leaned out of the window and asks our shepherd: "If I can tell you exactly how many goats you have in your flock, will you give me one'?"

The shepherd looks at the yuppie, then at his peacefully grazing flock and calmly answers, "Why not?"

The yuppie parks the car, whips out his notebook, connects it to a cell phone, surfs to a NASA page on the Internet where he calls up a GPS satellite navigation system, scans the area, and opens up a database and some 60 Excel spreadsheets, with complex formulas. Finally, he prints out a 150 page report on his hi-tech, miniaturized printer, turns round to our shepherd, and says: "You have exactly 1,586 goats!"

"That's correct. As agreed, you can take one of the goats," says the shepherd.

The shepherd watches, as the yuppie makes a selection and bundles it into his Grand Cherokee. Then, the shepherd says to the yuppie, "If I can tell you exactly what your business is, will you give me my goat back?"

"Why not?" answers the smart young man.

"You are a consultant," says the shepherd.

"That's correct," says the yuppie, "But how did you guess that?"

"It was easy. You turn up here, although nobody called you. You want to be paid for the answer to a question, to which I already knew the solution. And you don't know anything about my business, because you took my dog."

LET US PRAY...

This morning I am going to tackle two "I AM statements" in the same sermon. The good news is they fit together and I will not have to preach twice as long. Today I would like to talk about the familiar statements "I am the gate" and "I am the good shepherd." Both of these statements come in the middle of an ongoing verbal battle between Jesus and the Pharisees. He has just accused them of being spiritually blind and now he insults them again by accusing them of being bad shepherds, even thieves and bandits. We may not hear the story that was read today as incendiary let me assure you the Pharisees who saw themselves as leaders of the Jewish flock would have picked up immediately on what Jesus was saying and would have been incensed.

This morning I would like to look at the story on two levels. First I would like to illustrate how Jesus' message angered the leadership of the day and then I would like to show how that same message brings us hope, comfort, and security as we look to our Lord as the Great Shepherd. The opening six verses of John 10 contain a very condensed and very confusing set of images that include gates, sheep, bandits,

thieves, and shepherds. Verse six even states that the first verses were confusing and that those who were listening did not understand so Jesus launches into a dozen or so more verses of explanation.

This explanation contains two “I AM statements” repeated twice each for emphasis. He says he is the “gate” and the “good shepherd,” two objects that don’t seem to go together. But they do. Let me address the gate first and very quickly and then move on to the image of the shepherd which I think is the more important of the two.

Because most of us are “sheepless” in Seattle (sorry for the pun but it was too easy) we don’t understand the true meaning of gates. In ancient Palestine shepherds would gather their flocks at night and put them in holding pens. When they were out in the wilderness the pens might be constructed out of briars and branches and when they moved the flocks closer to town they would put them in communal pens. In either case there was only one way into these pens and that was through the one gate. To make sure no animals escaped and no predators entered the shepherd would lie down in the gate and actually becomes the gate. He would put his body in harm’s way to protect his sheep.

In those communal pens when morning broke each shepherd would come to the gate and call his sheep. Only his sheep would respond. The rest would wait. His sheep would know him and he would know instantly if one made a mistake and followed incorrectly. He would then take his flock off to the best pasture he could find and nurture them throughout the day and would then bring them back at night to protect them from intruders. He did this because he cared.

So a good shepherd is not only a gate, but also knows, nurtures, and protects his sheep. I would like to look at those qualities as they relate to the ultimate Good Shepherd – our Lord.

Sheep are not the smartest animals in the world but they are smarter than cows. I don’t know where money comes for some of these studies but there was actually a scientific study done in Cambridge, England at the Babraham Institute that measured the IQ of various farm animals. Sheep ranked just below pigs but a lot higher than cows. The study showed that sheep have remarkable memories and that they are able to pick out a particular face in a line of pictures, if that face is associated with a food reward. Some of the sheep in the study could actually remember up to fifty images for as long as two years. Not only could they identify images but they had a keen sense of hearing and could pick out voices and remember which ones brought food rewards.

So sheep actually do know their shepherds and this knowledge goes both ways. Even though they possess some smarts, sheep tend to wander away. They do that by following their food sources and they graze themselves into places they shouldn’t be. Sounds like some of us at times. When they are separated they let out a high-pitch bleating noise and a good shepherd will know from that sound which sheep it is and what kind of danger they are in.

This “knowing” brings comfort and security to the flock and to us as the flock of the Great Shepherd. Why is it that the 23rd Psalm is so powerful and requested at so many funerals? It is one that makes us feel secure in moments of turmoil, doubt, and change. Did you know many of our counselors today attribute the bulk of our emotional disorders to insecurity? It’s true. Scratch most of us in just the right way and you will discover our deepest insecurities and if they are exposed and not healed we can turn in all sorts of dangerous directions to find love and acceptance.

All of us wrestle with insecurities. It is true with the teenager who is trying to find acceptance in his or her peer group all the way up to the most successful business person. We all drag around our insecurities and try our best not to let anyone know we have them.

For one moment I would like for you to truly embrace the words of our Lord the Good Shepherd. “I know my sheep and they know me.” Pause with me for just a moment and close your eyes. Say to

yourself, "The Lord knows me. The Lord knows me warts and all and still claims me as his own. The Lord knows me and will comfort, protect, and nurture me." Can you feel the comfort that brings? Can you feel the security that imparts? Think what that does for your prayer life, for working in your family, or for feeling secure in the workplace.

I AM the good shepherd and I know my sheep is perhaps one of the most transforming and comforting promises in the Bible. But there is more

Jesus also promised to nurture and protect us. As I said earlier Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows us warts and all and loves us, and because of that wants the best for us and even says I want you to have life and have it abundantly. So what is abundant life for Christ? It is life in the kingdom. It is transformed life. Christ wants to change us so we can fully receive the gift of abundant life.

Phillip Yancey once said, "God loves us just the way we are but God doesn't want us to stay like that. He wants us to look more and more like Christ." Do you remember the story of the Prodigal Son? It is a story of wandering away and returning to the loving arms of a forgiving parent. Flora Wuellner in her book, "To Pray and to Grow," wrote, "It was not enough for the prodigal son in Jesus' parable to leave the pigs. The pigs have not yet left him! Safe now in his father's house, he still has bad habits to master and new attitudes to cultivate."

That is the whole notion of sanctifying grace. We have been forgiven, loved, and now nurtured so that we start looking more and more like Jesus every day. We are unfinished sheep and we need to keep hanging around the Good Shepherd for direction and nurture.

Finally the Good Shepherd protects his flock from harm. I remember back to my journalism days in Idaho when we received word that a major stream in the foothills that was flowing into the water supply of the city was being contaminated by hundreds of dead animals. We rented a helicopter and took the door off my side and we went searching for the source of the contamination. We knew approximately where the animals were but in the air all the streams look the same. We were about to give up when I smelled something way up in the air. It was a sickening smell that I can still remember to this day. We hovered over a cliff and looked down into the stream below and there were hundreds of dead sheep piled one on top of the other.

We landed and walked to the top of the cliff and there was a Basque shepherd in inconsolable despair. Two days evenings earlier a bear had ravaged the camp and the sheep stampeded. The lead sheep trying to escape the bear ran off the cliff and it was followed by all the others. The old shepherd was still sitting on the edge of the cliff. He probably had not moved from the moment of the tragedy. It was his job to protect his flock and he had failed. Through his broken English he let us know the depths of his pain and how he was not a good shepherd. I am sure that if he had it all to do again he would rather be lying at the bottom of that cliff than his flock.

Good shepherds know when they assume responsibility for a flock they have the ultimate responsibility of protecting them from danger. Jesus declares, "I am the Good Shepherd and I lay down my life for my sheep." Just so we don't miss the importance. Just so we don't miss the power and the hopefulness of his words. Just so we don't misunderstand what he is saying, Jesus repeats this statement three times in eight verses!

I would like to stop one more time and reflect on the significance of this statement. In order to understand it you need to get in touch with one of your greatest fears. You need to claim that which is out there in your world that you need protection from. What do you fear most in life? Is it failure? Is it old age or illness? Is it a broken relationship? Is it something happening in your family that is just not working out the way you wanted or dreamed it would be?

Christ declares three times I will protect you from your greatest danger. You will not have to fight the fight alone. I will not let you be destroyed in the process IF you place your trust in me. That IF is the key however, because the Good Shepherd can do nothing for us unless we allow him to protect us. How do we do that? How do we allow him to protect us? Well let's go back to the story.

We become his sheep. We develop our hearing so that we will recognize his voice over all the other voices and noises that demand our attention. We get to know his voice through prayer, through study, through worship, and through witnessing with others. We stay as close as we can to the shepherd because if we wander too far away we will be out of earshot. In order to be his sheep we have to listen and that is one of the hardest things we can do in a noisy, busy, distracting world.

We also need to be obedient when we do hear the voice. We need to be obedient in the small things, in the everyday relationships, in the simple tasks of truth telling and grace sharing, and in the common practices of hospitality and mercy. We have to be obedient in the little things so when the big threats come or the big tasks demand our attention we will still obey.

I said at the beginning of this sermon series the "I AM Statements" are transforming promises when we take them to heart. This is one of the most transforming because it invites us to a relationship of intimacy, nurture, and protection. It invites us to put aside all our fears, doubts, and insecurities and follow the Great Shepherd who says, "I know you and you know me. I will lay down my life for you."