

### The First Reading – Psalm 23

<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. <sup>2</sup>He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; <sup>3</sup>he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. <sup>4</sup>Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. <sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. <sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

### The Second Reading – John 10:11-18

<sup>11</sup>“**I am the good shepherd.** The good shepherd *lays down his life for the sheep.* <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup>**I am the good shepherd.** I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And *I lay down my life for the sheep.* <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>For this reason the Father loves me, because *I lay down my life* in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>*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.”

Do you remember ever playing tug of war? Maybe at a family picnic or at the beach with friends. One long rope and two sides. A contest in which two teams pull at opposite ends of a rope until one team drags the other over a central line. Or how about arm wrestling, where two opponents grip each other's hand and place their elbows on a table. If you have participated or watched either of these contests, it is not often that a surrender occurs. The team or individual will go down with a valiant fight, but probably would never think of surrendering.

White flags are just not in our makeup. We just don't like to surrender or some might say “give up.” Yet, listen to what Jesus has to say to us today, “I lay down my life for my sheep.” Jesus, doesn't just say this once in our text, he says again a few verses later, “No one takes it from me, I lay it down of my own accord.” Jesus willingly lays down his life. Jesus surrenders his life for the sake of others, not unlike the description of what it takes to be a good shepherd.

In Ezekiel, the Lord says, “As a shepherd I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered. I will bring them out and gather them in. I will feed them. I will make them lie down... I will seek the lost. I will bring back the strayed. I will bind up the injured. I will strengthen the weak. Commentator Sarah Heinrich writes, “The clear definition of a shepherd's task is to feed the sheep adequately, care for their ailments, keep them gathered together, and put their well-being before his own.” Shepherds, good shepherds that is, do not leave sheep vulnerable, uncared for or abandoned. In my biblical translation this section of Ezekiel 34 is entitled, “God, the True Shepherd.” Or as David penned, “The Lord is my shepherd,” because he safely led David to food and water and secure rest. Even in the presence of enemies the Lord kept David safe.

So, we know what a True Shepherd is, but what about a false shepherd? According to Ezekiel false shepherds feed themselves first. They don't strengthen the weak. They don't seek

out the lost. Instead, they lead with force and harshness, scattering the sheep and allowing them to fall prey to wolves. Jesus shares similar words in the Gospel of John saying, "The hired hand, sees the wolf coming and runs away, so that the sheep are snatched and scattered. The hired hand runs away because he doesn't care for the sheep." False shepherds and shepherds for hire think of themselves first, not the sheep that they are supposed to care for. Self-interest not the interest of others guides false shepherds.

"I am the good shepherd," says Jesus in our text this morning. This is one of seven "I am" statements in the Gospel of John. With Jesus' "I am" statements, we hear echoes of God's response to Moses from the Book of Exodus. Moses says to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they say, 'What is his name?' what shall I say?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." "I am" says Jesus. "I am" aligned with God's mission. Jesus used "I am" repeatedly in the Gospel of John, for a total of seven times: "I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the gate; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way and the truth and the life, and I am the vine." "I am" aligned with God, for the Father knows me and I know the Father.

"I am the good shepherd." Now the Greek word translated as "good" in this "I am" statement has a variety of meanings, including ordered, sound, noble, ideal, model, true, competent, faithful and praiseworthy. Jesus isn't just any shepherd, for he embodies the strength, power, sympathy, kindness and mercy of a model shepherd, of a true shepherd. No sacrifice is too great for the sheep – even the shepherd's very life is available in support of God's purposes.

Hence why I entitled today's message, "Lay it down," for Jesus willingly laid down his life for us his sheep. Yet, what does this mean for us?

First, it means we are sheep and sheep are not known for being all too smart. Yet, Barbara Brown Taylor has another angle for she writes, "Cattle ranchers are the ones who started the rumor that sheep are dumb, because sheep don't behave like cows. Cows are herded from the rear with shouts and prods from cowboys. But that doesn't work with sheep. Sheep prefer to be led. Sheep will not go anywhere that someone else - their trusted shepherd - does not go first, to show them that everything is all right." Now that sounds pretty smart to me. Sheep want to make sure the way is clear and safe before they proceed, so they rely on their shepherd.

This passage speaks of intimacy and security, for the good shepherd knows his sheep and the sheep know the good shepherd's voice. We know the voice, we just need to surrender to the shepherd's lead. But, do we?

I think our problem begins with the word surrender. It is not a popular word in our culture. It connotes weakness. I looked up various online dictionary sources and here is a basic definition, "To surrender is to give up control of something to someone else." Did you hear that, "Give up control?" Let's take a quick poll, who likes to give up control?

Yes, surrender is the act of allowing yourself to be influenced or controlled by someone or something. When faith is added to the equation, to surrender means that one completely gives up her own will and subjects her thoughts, ideas, and deeds to the will and teachings of God. The word "completely" is now the challenge, for I don't believe any of us ever fully surrender this side of heaven. We are called to seek the kingdom of God first, to follow the

Good Shepherd's lead, we just don't always do so. We hear the shepherd calling our names, but then we turn away or are drawn away by our own self-interests.

As Ezekiel suggests we are prone to follow false shepherds. We seem to easily follow those who inflate our egos or those who give us what we want. We seem to get so comfortable with the ways things are that we don't realize that enemies are lurking. We know the voice of our good shepherd, but we don't listen.

So, let me put this into perspective. The elder still had a key to the church building, although the church had closed and the building had been abandoned. "The elder led me around the darkened building with confidence using only a flashlight," says Thom Rainer. "But then he stopped and pointed to the room in front of us. A sign was still on the room: Lydia Room." The elder started sharing, "This room was the equivalent of a parlor or bride's room. This room had the nicest furniture and got first attention before anything else in the church. But, the question was always who could use the room and the arguments got pretty ugly. I don't think I knew it at the time, but looking back, our focus on this room was the beginning of our end. It seems so silly, so sad now. While we were fighting over a room our church died." The voice of the false shepherd - of self-interest - snatched and scattered the sheep.

Thom Rainer tells story after story of churches that split or died over the arguments about buildings that got pretty ugly, whether it was a parlor, a pulpit or a memorial plaque. The sheep listened to voice of self-interest, rather than listening to the voice of the good shepherd that willingly laid self-interest down.

Lay it down. As a church, we are going to need to listen carefully to the voice of the good shepherd, the one who teaches us how to lay down our self-interests for the sake of others. We will need to do this, because I imagine that we will all be challenged by some of the decisions that will be made as we move forward, whether it is redesigning the front of this sanctuary or John Knox Hall, whether it is supporting ministries for single moms or veterans, whether it is focusing on our community or how we are going to partner with others to bring the basement of this building to life. If the self-interest of false shepherds takes hold of us, then the way forward is bleak.

As Tod Bolsinger suggests in his book *Canoeing the Mountains*, we must adventure or die. We must be willing to follow the Good Shepherd to places we might have never imagined. We must be willing to listen to the Good Shepherd's voice, for we are not the only sheep, there are others out there. But how will we know that unless we follow the lead of the Good Shepherd who goes before us?

"Lay it down for the sake of others," says the Good Shepherd. Lay it down. This will not be easy for any of us, because we are all reluctant sheep. We all like to be in control. We all like it our way. Yet, the Good Shepherd is calling to us and we know his voice. Jesus willingly laid down his life for the sake of others, will we? Amen.