

## “The Good Shepherd”

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John 10:1-11; Psalm 23

To begin, I am going offer a brief lesson in grammar. Apologies in advance to any and all instructors of English. The subject of today’s lesson is articles, definite vs. indefinite. A definite article is used when the noun that accompanies that article is known to the reader. An indefinite article is used when the noun is unknown to the reader.<sup>1</sup> For example: if I say to Brittany that *a* house is on fire, using the indefinite article, she would probably think that is a very strange bit of information for me to share with her. I could be referring to any house in the world. But if I were to say to her that *the* house is on fire, using the definite article, things will get urgent a lot more quickly. *A* dog running around in the street is a simple curiosity. *The* dog running around in the street means that you are about to start running, too.

Jesus doesn’t say in the gospel that he is *a* good shepherd, as if he was one among many. No, he is *the* Good Shepherd, not only in a singular sense, but in that we are to know him in that way. It’s not that others cannot shepherd us in good ways. All of our lives have been impacted and changed for the better by good people who have guided us. But there is

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.butte.edu/departments/cas/tipsheets/grammar/articles.html#:~:text=The%20definite%20article%20\(the\)%20is,a%20noun%20takes%20no%20article](https://www.butte.edu/departments/cas/tipsheets/grammar/articles.html#:~:text=The%20definite%20article%20(the)%20is,a%20noun%20takes%20no%20article)

one Shepherd of our hearts, one Shepherd who is up to the task of caring for his entire flock, one Shepherd who is worthy of the ultimate care of our souls. And so this Shepherd is the only one worthy of the definite article.

Any earthly shepherd, any leader, even the one who is mostly good, lacks the capacity to be everything that we need. No one is infinite. This is a lesson I am learning in both the ways in which I am called to seek leadership in others and in the ways I am called to lead. I am not infinite. I cannot do everything.

But compare this with the expansive and perfect ability of Jesus. In our passage today, Jesus not only calls himself the shepherd, but he is also the door by which the sheep enter into his care. We might expand the analogy to say that he is the wall as well, for it is Jesus who sets the boundaries of what it means to be a Christian, and Jesus who protects us from outside influences coming in.

Have you ever met a person who sought to fill all of those roles in your life? This can happen in Christian circles of course, but not exclusively so. Maybe it is a Christian leader, maybe it is a news commentator, perhaps another sort of influencer, but whenever someone sets up him- or herself as your only shepherd, your boundary marker, the only way that you can

enter into the life you are meant to live, watch out! Only Jesus is worthy of that complete and total trust. Good lower-case “s” shepherds will point you to him.

Christ has proven this on the Cross. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”<sup>2</sup> Apart from Jesus, we see far too often the opposite, false shepherds using up the life of those they lead for their own gain.

And what does Jesus call those who would treat his flock in such a way? “He who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.”<sup>3</sup> There are many thieves and robbers. Do not be fooled by them.

This teaching on Jesus as the Good Shepherd comes immediately after John’s telling of the healing of the man born blind, a saga of struggle between the healing power of God that brings light to darkness and the resistance that comes from the darkness that is being pushed out. Darkness doesn’t take losing lightly and so there is pushback, as often there is for those who can now see what they couldn’t before. The pushback in this instance comes from the Pharisees, who interrogate this newly-seeing man, grilling him on how he had received his sight and

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<sup>2</sup> John 10:11

<sup>3</sup> John 10:1

wanting him to give them further evidence that Jesus was someone for them to get rid of. The whole scene ends with the man getting cast out of the synagogue, kicked out of his congregation for being healed and saying that Jesus was from God because he healed him.

And Jesus, the Good Shepherd steps in. He finds his outcast sheep, and has him affirm his faith. He then offers critique of those Pharisees, consistent with what we see in the other Gospels. He suggests that it is they who are blind. And then he begins with the words we heard today in chapter 10, talking about thieves and robbers, entering the sheepfold by unauthorized ways.

Israel had seen a host of bad shepherds. From the time of the Judges, far too many leaders did what was right in their own eyes, leading the people of Israel towards disaster.

And if we think that we are somehow immune from bad shepherds who get into the fold by means other than the way of Jesus, I have some bad news this morning. Because the problem persists. Some of us here today have been the victims of shepherds who failed to keep bad theology that dishonors God out of the Church. This is what we are seeing play out literally on a global scale in our Anglican family. This is like the bad

shepherd who knocks chunks of rock out of the wall of the sheep pen, allowing anything and everyone into the flock of God.

But tragically, this is not the only form of bad shepherding we see in our days. For there are shepherds, some widely publicized and others who are not so publicized, who appear to say all of the right things theologically, but dishonor God and their flock in their actions, by abuse, mistreatment, and control. This is like the bad shepherd who uses the secure wall of the sheep pen to ensure easy access and easy mistreatment of the sheep who are inside. Lord save us from bad shepherds.

There is another form of bad shepherding as well. For there are sheep, precious sheep of God's flock, who are so fed up with the bad shepherding they've encountered, whether of the first type I've just mentioned or the second, that they have abandoned participation in the Church altogether. But outside of the sheepfold there waits a host of other bad shepherds who seek to exploit them as well. Have you ever heard someone talk about a politician or a newscaster as if they were their pastor, a political party or a media company as if they were their church? Have you ever felt like someone spoke as if they were being disciplined by the internet or some influencer they found there? More importantly, have you felt the draw to any of those things yourself?

Bad shepherds, whether they are acting in the name of God or not, result in bad outcomes for sheep. Broken lives, broken trust, shattered faith.

Oftentimes on this Sunday in our lectionary, the Old Testament reading is from Ezekiel chapter 34, where God laments that the shepherds of Israel are not protecting his sheep and even consuming them for themselves. God's response can be summed up in verse 10 of Ezekiel 34: "Thus says the Lord God, behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them."<sup>4</sup> That is God's response to bad shepherds.

How do we protect ourselves from getting caught up with bad shepherds? Don't get me wrong, shepherds who misuse their station bear all blame for their own actions, but still it is important to strengthen our discernment in this area so as to protect ourselves and others, and to remain faithful to the one Good Shepherd.

Here's what Jesus says: "But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has

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<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 34:10, ESV.

brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.”<sup>5</sup> The sheep know the voice of the Shepherd.

But how will we know this voice? I began this morning with a grammatical lesson that most if not all of you probably already knew, but I hope our move to the world of music will be new information for at least a few of you. And buckle up, because I think this might be the nerdiest illustration I have put into a sermon.

The word of the day is leitmotif, a word originating from the world of classical music and opera. A leitmotif is a theme or musical phrase that is associated with a certain character or theme in a musical performance, like the villain in an opera having a certain melody played every time he comes on stage.

Most of us are familiar with the concept of a leitmotif, even if we don't know the word, because of how the leitmotif is used in film. And now we get into the reason for why I had no need to study what a leitmotif was when it was a vocabulary word on my Music Appreciation test, because I am an avid fan of the king of the leitmotif, the incomparable film composer John Williams.

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<sup>5</sup> John 10:2-4

If you are to get a film theme stuck into your head, there is a decent chance that theme was written by John Williams. Williams wrote the iconic scores for Jaws, E.T., Indiana Jones, Jurassic Park, the original Superman films, Harry Potter, and many others, including of course, the nine episodes of the main Star Wars saga. Really to explain the concept of a leitmotif, all I need to do is to tell you that a leitmotif is the reason you can tell when Darth Vader is on the screen even when you're not looking at it.

For those who are listening closely, Williams and other composers will play with these themes, using them in ways that the audience may not expect, but deepen the story for those who are paying attention.

When you hear the Imperial March, you know Vader is on the way. When you hear those two ominous notes from Jaws, you know to get out of the water. Jesus wants us to have a similar awareness of his own voice, the voice of the Good Shepherd. What is the melody that tells you that you are listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd?

We need to look no further than that great Psalm of the Shepherd:

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

The Good Shepherd provides for our needs, not according to our own understanding, but according to his own understanding as our Creator and the One who loves us more than we can imagine.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.”

The Good Shepherd leads us to a place of security and that is for our good. What bad shepherds have damaged, he heals.

“He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name’s sake.”

The Good Shepherd will not lead us astray. His paths, his commands are for our good. He stakes his Holy Name on it.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.”

Not even death can phase the Good Shepherd. And those elements that gently keep us on the right path, they are also for our defense against those who would do us harm.

“You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.”

The Good Shepherd blesses us so richly that even those who wish us harm will witness his favor over us. And even they are invited to his Table.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
forever.”

The care of the Good Shepherd doesn't expire. His promises extend for all time. We walk in goodness, mercy, and love.

That is the voice of the Good Shepherd. If you want make sure you are following him, listen for that melody. If you have been harmed by a bad shepherd, listen for that melody. Follow the Good Shepherd. If you have,

like us all, wandered away from him, listen for his voice and return. In whatever way that you have been called to shepherd others, make sure that this melody and this Shepherd are the ones that take priority over whatever melodies and forms you have come up with on your own. And let us, all of us, stand in awe of the goodness of our Shepherd, who calls for us to come to him.