

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Good Shepherd

Pastor Scott Dudley

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Scripture: John 10:10-15

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

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own 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. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

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

Transcript:

Well, hello, BelPres. Thank you for joining us here on Sunday morning for worship. My name is Scott Dudley. I'm the senior pastor here, and we are so excited to have you join us for worship. So thank you so much for making us part of your Sunday. The scripture this morning comes from John chapter 10, beginning with verse 10. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they might have life and have it to the full. I am The Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own 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. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am The Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me just as the father knows me and I know the father and I lay down my life for my sheep."

So Holy Spirit, we ask that you would use these next few minutes to help us understand this scripture and what it means for our lives. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen. Well, we're

continuing our sermon series on the different names of God in the Bible, and so far we've looked at names like Most High God or Consuming Fire, big, powerful names like that. But today's name is a bit of a shift from that. The Good Shepherd, which is not just a Matt Damon movie, it's actually a name for God in both the Old and the New Testament, and it seems like a gentler, tamer name for God than Consuming Fire or something like that. Shepherd is also a bit of a foreign concept to us, I think, particularly living in urban areas. How many of you majored in or plan to major in shepherding in college? Anyone have any sheep in your backyard? Probably not.

If you grew up going to church, you probably think of Sunday school pictures like this one, Jesus as shepherd. Also, Jesus looking very, very wimpy and really very, very White, which he wasn't. But in Jesus' time, shepherds were not wimps. They were not weak people. They had to protect the sheep from wolves and thieves and predators and all kinds of things. Right before David kills Goliath, he says that he can do it even though he's a kid because he's been a shepherd. And he says, "When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it." Anyone grab a lion by the hair lately? This is a strong image. Shepherd is a strong, powerful image for God. And it's also a bit of a scandalous image, and I'll talk about that in a minute.

And when we understand that Jesus is our Good Shepherd, we make better decisions, we do fewer stupid things that hurt other people, we have more courage, and we live a bigger life. And in this text, there are four characters that we're going to look at this morning to understand how this name of God changes our lives, the sheep, the shepherd, the hired hand, and the thief. So first the sheep. Of all the farming analogies that Jesus could have chosen, raising cattle, raising horses, something like that, Jesus chose the most personal relational image, sheep and shepherd. Jesus says, "I am The Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me." Back then, shepherds knew the personality of each sheep. Sometimes they would even name the sheep. Then Jesus also says, "Sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice." And this is actually true, sheep actually know your voice.

One of our staff people this week told me that her aunt lived on a ranch and used to raise goat and sheep. And one day there's this big fire, and so her dad went to help the aunt and the aunt went to look for the goats and the dad was trying to get the sheep rounded up, but the sheep refused to come to him. In fact, instead, they ran toward the fire rather than toward him. But when the aunt got back, all she had to do was call to them and they came back because they knew her voice. Sheep know the shepherd's voice. And there's a reason that shepherds had to know their sheep so well, and it's not a compliment. It's because sheep are definitely stupid. My grandfather raised sheep, so I know all about sheep. They'll eat poison plants if you're not watching them constantly and die. They get lost really easily. They have a tendency to follow each other. Often they'll follow each other literally right off a cliff or into a ravine they can't get out of.

And then they panic and run to and fro and get all riled up and scared and start running all over, maybe like some people you know. Maybe like you sometimes. So it is deeply disturbing for Jesus to say, "I am The Good Shepherd," because it implies that we are silly, stupid sheep. And we do not like to think of ourselves as stupid sheep. We like to inflate how important we

are. A couple of weeks ago, I noticed that the way we laid out the title slides for the PowerPoint for these sermons could give you the wrong impression. Like this one over there on the left, the title says, "I Am," and then, "The Lord God Almighty, Scott Dudley." "Wow, doesn't he think a lot of himself? Who does he think he is?" That's what we do. We like to inflate our importance. But in our hearts, deep down, don't you know, really you're sheep, right? Prone to wander, even off of a cliff? Have you ever made a bad decision? Ever hurt someone? Ever done something you regretted?

I've had people say to me, "Man, if my spouse knew everything that goes on in my head, all my temptations and fantasies, they'd leave me." But actually I think that's true for all of us. If a lot of people in our lives knew what actually goes on in our heads sometimes, they'd be freaked out. The point of calling a sheep is that we need a shepherd. We sin, we make bad decisions, we hurt people. We need a shepherd to guide us, because as Isaiah says, the prophet Isaiah says, "All we like sheep have gone astray." However, the emphasis in this text is not on the stupidity of the sheep. The emphasis of this text is on the love and strength and power of a shepherd, and that's the second character that we're going to look at. And he's not just a regular shepherd. Jesus says, "I am The Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me, and just as the father knows me, I know the father, and I lay down my life for the sheep."

And that's an astonishing statement. "I know my sheep the way the father knows me, and I know the father." This takes us into the mystery of the Trinity. Jesus is fully God along with the father and the Holy Spirit, three persons, and yet one. So how well do you think they know each other, thoroughly, no secrets? And what this means is Jesus doesn't just know you in general, he knows you in your particular sheepishness, all the sheepy things you do and the sheepy things you think and all the sheepy ways you have about you. He says, "I have seen those thoughts that you hide from everyone. Underneath all your swagger and bravado, I have seen how deeply insecure you actually are. I have seen you to the bottom of your soul. And then what's next? And I'm going to reject you and I'm going to punish you. And I'm really mad at you? No. I have seen you all the way to the bottom of your soul and I will lay down my life for you."

And this phrase, "lay down your life for the sheep," it has another resonance, because back then when sheep were at night, the shepherd would put the sheep in a kennel or in a pen, and the shepherd would lay down across the opening to the pen. And if a predator came or the thief came, they'd have to get by the shepherd and he would fight for them. Jesus says, "I will lay down my life for you. I have seen you, I've seen your sin, but I still love you, because you are that valuable to me." And see, there's a second thing about sheep, because even though they were stupid, they were also, back in Jesus' day, the most valuable animal you could have because of their wool.

Jesus says, "I have seen you to the bottom of your soul, and I will lay down my life for you. I will lay across the opening so that when the wolf comes, I will fight for you and defend you and I will fight for your soul," which is exactly what he does when he dies on a cross to absorb the just punishment for our sins so that we can be forgiven and have our shame removed. And here's where the scandalous part of this image comes in. Because see, back then, shepherds were way at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They were considered morally unclean because

they worked with animals. They were thought to be liars and thieves, and if you so much as brushed up against a shepherd, you would be considered unclean as well. So if you ever got to play the shepherd part in the Christmas play, you actually got the worst part.

So in Psalm 23 when he says, "The Lord is my shepherd," that is a shocking image. It's like saying, "The Lord is my garbage collector," which, if you think about it, he is. Or, "The Lord is my recycler, recycling the trash in my life and using it for good." In fact, in spite of how despised shepherds were, they did play one valuable religious function, they had one important religious role, and that was they provided lambs to be sacrificed to atone for sin. And Jesus is called "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." That's another one of his names. So when the wolf comes, the shepherd became the lamb who lays down his life and pays the price for our sin so that we can be forgiven. The Lord is my recycler, I shall not want. When you have wandered off, when you have made the stupidest decision ever, when you have deeply hurt someone else, when you have massively screwed up, Jesus pursues you.

And when he finds you, he doesn't say, "Oh, I can't believe you've done this, you stupid sheep. Bad enough to be your shepherd, now look what you've done." He says, "I've found you. I am so happy. Now, let's have a party." His love for you is unmovable, unshakable, unstoppable, no power in hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck you from his hand. Nobody loves you like Jesus. Nobody loves you like Jesus. If you find a better offer than Jesus, take it, which brings me to the third character that we're going to look at, and that is the hired hand, the person who's been hired to help out with the sheep. And what's the chief characteristic of the hired hand? Jesus says, "When he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away, because he is a hired hand and he cares nothing for the sheep." So the hired hand is the person that just bolts when things get hard.

And if we're honest, even the closest people in our lives can let us down and even run right out of our lives when things get tough, because every human being is flawed and sinful. They're like the hired hand, people we look to for happiness and security and leadership, and they can be helpful. Hired hands weren't bad. Hired hands were actually very helpful sometimes. They just weren't sufficient. Never confuse the hired hand with the shepherd. A lot of people think, "Man, if I only get married, then I'm going to be happy." But if we look to our spouse to fulfill us in every way, that's too much pressure. They're going to let us down, maybe even run right out of our lives. "Well, if I only were more popular or was better respected, then I'd feel better." But popularity, accolades, all that goes away the first time you do something that someone else doesn't like.

"If I could only get into college." "If I could only have kids." "If I only had a little bit more money." And those are good things, they are helpful things, but they can't be our source of ultimate security and joy. They are the hired hand, not the shepherd. Never confused the hired hand with the shepherd. And so many of us carry deep pain because some hired hand has let us down. The friend that left you the minute you were no longer of any use to him. The coworker who threw you under the bus. The parent that wasn't there for you when you needed them or set a bad example for you, or maybe even abused you. Some people have been hurt by the church or by other Christians and they start to not trust Jesus because of it. The church may let you down, I may let you down, but Jesus will never let you down. We get let down when we

follow a hired hand more than the shepherd, and when we look to a hired hand to fulfill us more than we do the shepherd.

And here's the thing, here's the thing, it's not a question of whether or not you follow someone or something. We're all following someone or something. The question is, what is it? Other sheep? The hired hand? The shepherd? Which brings me to the last character, the thief. Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." And as Bishop TD Jakes points out, the verse says the thief will come. It doesn't say the thief might come. It doesn't say if the thief comes. It says the thief comes. He's come. He comes. He's going to come to kill steal and destroy. Steal your joy, kill your relationship with God, destroy God's purposes in your life. The ultimate thief is Satan, but he has all kinds of ways of getting at us. Sometimes it's a tragedy like cancer or unemployment or a friend betrays you. Sometimes it's the voice of discouragement, "You're not enough of this. You're too much of that. You're doing it wrong."

Whatever it is, it is not a question of whether or not the thief is going to come. The thief comes, but if the thief comes, someone else is coming too, the shepherd also is coming. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. But Jesus says, "I have come that they might have life and have it to the full." You do not face the thief alone. The thief will come, but the shepherd comes too, that you may have life in all of its fullness, pressed down, heaped up, overflowing the measure, life. You hear a lot of talk these days about finding our best life, my best life now. Here's my Instagram post from Hawaii. Living my best life now. Jesus says, "I'm going to give you your best life, life at its most intense, life with no substitutes, no numbing out on entertainment, addictions, success, accolades. Life at its very best, most intense."

I think of my lifelong mentor, who I've told you about before, who even as he was dying of cancer wrote almost daily blogs about what he was experiencing, the highs and the lows, all the ways that God was showing up. As he laid dying, he was texting his closest friends saying, "I think this is my last day on earth, but I want to let you know how much I love you and the hope I have in Jesus." And his blog posts brought so much hope to so many people, including me, because it was evidence that God works for good even in the harshest of circumstances. And when he died, his memorial had thousands and thousands of people because he had changed so many lives. And then the publisher took all those blog posts and turned it into a book called Joy In The Journey that's still giving hope to all kinds of people. It's not like the last nine months of his life was just spent waiting to die. He had life to its full. Not one wasted day, breaking the tape at the end of the race, still running in full stride.

The thief comes, but so does The Good Shepherd who says, "I come against every thief who tries to steal your destiny, kill your joy, and destroy my plans for you. I fight for your joy. I fight for your future. I fight for your peace. I fight for what I have started in you. I'm like David, when the bear comes, I grab its hair and I kill it. I am not the hired hand. I am The Good Shepherd and I don't run from a fight." Sheep, shepherd, hired hand, thief. So what does all this mean for us? What does it mean for our lives and how do we then respond? What's our response? Two things. First, to access the power of the shepherd, you have to admit and accept. Admit, "I'm a sheep," and accept Jesus as my shepherd. Not intellectualists saying to a bunch of theological truth propositions. As I said, the image of shepherd is a very relational one. Ask for a personal relationship.

And if you've never done that, you can do that right now. You just say, "Jesus, I am a sheep, man. I go astray. I have hurt people. I have sin. Jesus come into my life. Be the forgiveness of my sins and the leader of my life." And if you do that, if you say that prayer, please let someone know in the chat so that we can follow up with you and help you to take some next steps. Second thing, follow the shepherd in every aspect of life. So this morning when I got up, I realized I was actually a little nervous, because we're resuming in-person worship today for our modern services. And I got up this morning and I thought, "For the last year, I've been just preaching to a camera." And so I'm like, "Do I know how to preach to real people in the room?" For a year now, all my sermons have been preceded by, "Three, two, one." And I'm like, "I don't know if I can preach without the camera man countdown to lead me and guide me."

So I'm like, "Oh, I don't know. I hope so." Follow Jesus like I follow the camera man countdown in every little detail of your life. Follow Jesus. Psalm 23 says, "The Lord is my shepherd. I lack for nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He guides me along the right paths for his namesake." We think we know what will make us happy. We think we know where the green pastures are, but we need someone to lead us and to guide us there, because we don't know. We're sheep. We wander off cliffs. The Bible says, "There's a way that appears to be right to a person, but in the end it leads to death." Have you ever made a terrible decision? Done something you later regretted? We need someone smarter than we are to lead us, to guide us to where the green grass is, because we don't know.

And that's what Jesus does to his commands in scripture. He leads us. He guides us. He does that through community of other Christians who can help us discern his will. He does that through the nudges he gives us, those nudges that the Holy Spirit gives us to do certain things. We don't know where the green grass is, so we need to follow Jesus. And here's the key, in every area of our life. Because I don't know about you, I know I'm really good. I think we're all really good at saying, "Jesus, I'll follow you here, but not over there. Jesus, you can save my soul, but my love life is up to me. Jesus, you are Lord in my life except over what I look at online. Jesus, I like you over here, but over there, just let me have my own way." We don't want a shepherd. We want a consultant or a personal assistant so we can ignore or explain away the things that we don't like.

"Yeah, I see that command there about keeping sex only within marriage or seeking racial justice or forgiving folks who are hurting me. But the Bible is an old book, I don't know if it applies anymore. I think if God really knew my personal situation, he might tweak that command a little bit." But he can't lead us to the green pastures if we don't follow him. And his commands are not meant to steal your joy, it's meant to give us the abundant life. Follow him. So here's your homework for this week, three things. First, as we've done with every sermon in this series, start every prayer you pray this week with this name for God, Good Shepherd. "Good Shepherd, lead me, guide me," and then say the rest of your prayer. Second, just do an inventory and ask, "Where am I following a hired hand or where maybe am I following another sheep?" Because we're really good at doing that.

One of our staff said this week that we're so prone to follow other sheep that we really need to learn to tell the difference between Jesus and a sheep's backside, because if that's all we're following is other sheep, that's all we're going to see. And we're so good at that. So ask yourself, "Where am I following a hired hand? Where am I following other sheep? And maybe where might I have let the thief into my life and I don't even know it?" And then third, look for your shepherd to show up in ordinary moments at ordinary times. Pay attention to those nudges you get, the thoughts in your head. Or look back and remember the ways that The Good Shepherd has guided you in your past, because looking back in our past can be super helpful.

One of the ways that God guided me and was my shepherd that I can look back on in my past was through all my various career journeys in my path, a lot of which I've told you about, but not this particular story. The last six months in my former church, my job was changed from college pastor to teaching pastor, and there were some good reasons for that. But it was a really hard transition for me. I loved the students so I had a lot of grief to be leaving them. I wasn't really sure I even wanted that new job. I mean, my plan had been to be a professor all along, not a pastor, and so I was just consumed with, was this the right move? And where was I headed in life? And anxiety about my future, anxiety about my career, and all of that. My last day as a college pastor, I was crying saying goodbye to the students. It was a mess.

Well, that afternoon, there was a ceremony for the woman who was responsible for getting me into ministry in the first place to install her as a professor in a college. And I was part of that installation service. And years earlier, when I was in graduate school so that I could become a professor, she was the college pastor in my former church. She invited me to lead a Bible study of college guys as well as do some preaching on a volunteer basis in the college group. And after she left, that led to me becoming the college pastor. So I was sitting in this ceremony to install her as a professor, and because I have a PhD in literature, I noticed, hm, this is like a literary device called *inclusio*. I thought this is very interesting bookends here. She got me into ministry when she was a pastor and I was going to be a professor, and now she's going to be the professor and I'm the pastor. How did that happen?

Well, it was a long convoluted journey with lots of twists and turns, but in that moment I realized Jesus had been my shepherd leading me in all those twists and turns toward greener pastures, orchestrating events I never could have or even wanted to at the time. Because if six years prior to that, when I was studying to be a professor, if you had told me I was going to wind up being a pastor, I'd have thrown up, which is why I think God doesn't let us see our future. We'd all be throwing up. But I had loved, I'd loved, being a college pastor way better than being a professor. And Jesus led me through all of those twists and turns to a better place than I ever would have chosen for myself. She's the professor, I'm the pastor, and that's better than my plan.

So as I was sitting there in that ceremony, I thought, "My job is changing, but he has always, always guided me. He's never let me down. I'm going to trust him still." And what I did not know then in that ceremony, what I did not know, was two weeks later, some Presbyterian church in Bellevue, who wants to go there, was going to call to see if I was interested in being the one thing I said I would really super never be, senior pastor. Oh dear God. If you're merciful, please no, not that. But, again, the shepherd knows his sheep. Jesus knew what would bring me life to

it's full better than I knew for myself. Because for me, not for others, but for me, being a professor was a hired hand thing. Good, but not the abundant life. As much as I love teaching, I love being your pastor more. And it's not because of the title or that I get to preach to a bunch of people. Those things are great but what makes it so abundant is you. It's you.

It's the relationships, that's what's been so abundant for me and all that God is doing in through and around us as a community. And when I've been discouraged, when the thief has come to steal, kill, and destroy, when I was following hired hands, not the shepherd, Jesus fought for me, encouraged me. Now, all of that took years, years, but in that ordinary moment, in that ceremony years ago, sitting there, I remembered all over again that Jesus had been my shepherd guiding me to better places than I would have chosen for myself. And so I will trust him again here and now. So where might you be following a hired hand or where might you have let the thief into your life and you don't even know you did it? And how can you follow the shepherd this week? Because it's only when we follow him that we find the green pastures where the thief has no power and the predator cannot win, and where we can say, "The Lord is my shepherd. I lack for nothing."

So Good Shepherd, thank you that you are The Good Shepherd who leads us, who guides us to the green pastures when we don't know where they are. So Lord, we give you our lives and we say, "Lead on, guide on, and Holy Spirit, help us to follow." In your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Read Deuteronomy 4:23-24

Opening Questions:

- Icebreaker: Where is your favorite place to nap?
- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions -- Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions – Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What do the sheep, the watchman, the gate, the shepherd, hired hand and thief represent?
- What things characterize the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?