

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

These are the words of Jesus in our gospel lesson this morning. But, what exactly, does he mean? Is he talking about literally dying? Maybe...maybe not.

On Sunday mornings, we hear scripture passages that very often are a bit like ‘sound bites.’ We probably understand the words we hear, but understanding the layers of meaning in those words requires that we know something about the context in which they were written or spoken.

So what do we need to know about the context of the passage from the gospel of John that we just heard?

There are two contexts here that we need to know about, so hold these two contexts in mind.

Here’s the first one: the time that the gospel of John was written; which was about 90 CE...at the end of the first century. It’s about 60 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70CE by Roman soldiers quelling a Jewish rebellion. After the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish people were slaughtered or forced into exile or enslaved. It was the beginning of the Great Diaspora that sent the people of Israel into the four corners of the known world. The Temple leaders, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Scribes fled to Jamnia on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea to escape the destruction. There they began to reconstruct the tenets of Judaism. One belief among them was that the destruction of the Temple was an expression of God’s wrath against the Jews because of the Christians who were claiming and believing that Jesus was the Son of God. They were offended themselves and were certain that God was offended, too! This gathering at Jamnia marked the formal expulsion from the synagogue of any Jew who believed in Jesus as the Christ. This is the backdrop upon which the gospel of John was written just 20 years later. This gospel is significantly different from the gospels of Mark and Matthew and Luke. It recounts different stories about Jesus and unlike the synoptic gospels it emphasizes the divinity of Jesus because it is being written for a community that is being persecuted and ostracized by its own ethnic and religious community because of its belief in the divinity of Jesus. This is the first context to think about. This is the audience for the gospel of John. This is the community for whom this gospel is written.

The second context is the series of events chronicled in this gospel. The words attributed to Jesus in this gospel are sometimes messages to the Jewish religious establishment. The frequent mention of people being afraid of 'the Jews' in this gospel refers to fear of the Jewish religious establishment, not the Jewish people. They were Jews themselves...and they had been abandoned by their own leaders.

So we tune in to Jesus now talking about the Good Shepherd and the hired hands. This passage comes immediately after the story of the man born blind who has had his sight given to him by Jesus. This man is now convinced that Jesus is the Messiah and is promptly ostracized from the local synagogue. The Pharisees are indignant that Jesus is being identified as the Son of God and they are outraged that this miracle occurred on the Sabbath. Have you ever noticed how passionately outraged people of faith can become when they believe they are defending God? This description by Jesus of the Good Shepherd is directed at the Pharisees and is overheard by Jesus' disciples and followers... as well as by the community of Christians for whom it was written.

Jesus talks about the hired hand who runs away from the sheep when he sees the wolf coming. The hired hand doesn't really care for the sheep. He doesn't own the sheep and he doesn't have a relationship with them. They are not his. Is Jesus making reference to the Jewish leaders who fled to Jamnia when the Romans destroyed the Temple? Jesus says the wolf...perhaps Rome...snatches the sheep and scatters them. Certainly, the Jewish people had been snatched, murdered and scattered by Roman soldiers. These are memories that are fresh in the minds of those for whom this gospel was written.

Jesus identifies himself to the Pharisees as the Good Shepherd. He says he's not going to abandon his sheep. He knows his own and they know him. They recognize his voice when they hear it. And he says that he will lay down his life for them and then take it up again. He stresses that he lays down his life willingly and voluntarily. He's not forced to do that. He has the power to lay it down and the power to take it up again. In John's gospel, Jesus is not raised from the dead by God. Jesus raises himself from the dead.

These are all such powerful images and such strong mandates to those of us who follow Jesus. Are we all being asked to lay down our lives? No. Jesus doesn't insist that the sheep lay down their lives. He insists that those who are called to be the earthly shepherds lay down theirs. Jesus' description of the Good Shepherd is about leadership...about the qualities of good leadership. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that we sang this morning lists all those qualities of good leadership seen in the Good Shepherd. And in that psalm, an individual psalm, the Lord Almighty is identified as the Good Shepherd. So when Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd, he is implying that he and God are one and the same.

The most obvious leader in any community of Christians is the priest, but there are other leaders in the parish as well. And to that extent, some of the sheep are also called to leadership of the flock. It is a sacred responsibility to care for the body of Christ...as priests or as lay ministers.

Anyone serving as ordained clergy should never think of this calling as a job. It's not a job. Those who make their way into the ordained clergy have been called by God into service to God's people. Ministry is not a profession. Jobs and professions are about the people who work in them. Ministry is not about ourselves, but about the people we serve. If we think about Ministry as a profession, then we become hired hands. Our focus becomes our own career path, our promotions, our own success in the eyes of others, the number of people we have in the pews, and what our retirement will look like. But when we see ministry as being about the welfare and care of the people entrusted to us, then the decisions we make are about what is best for them, not what seems to be best for us.

We are Easter people. We believe in the resurrection. We believe that life comes after what we see as death. And all of us, ordained clergy or lay leaders or believers in Jesus Christ can choose to lay down our lives for the people of God without concern about ourselves. We are not asked to literally die for them as Jesus did, but to lay down our lives...set aside our own ambitions and desires...for the welfare of others. We are asked to invest ourselves in others to the point where our welfare is not what matters to us, but their welfare.

Jesus says that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Only after we re-commit to God and to Jesus, acknowledge our shortcomings and failings in the confession that we make, accept God's forgiveness for those shortcomings, and open ourselves and our hearts to others ....only then do we truly become Good Shepherds as Jesus as described.

We spend our lives...our time and our energy and our love...on others rather than worrying about our own welfare. This is how we lay down our lives for those in our care. And we do so because we choose to do so. We want to do so. We do so out of love, just as Jesus did.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd...the Good Shepherd for all of us. He will not abandon us. He will care for our needs. He will invest in us every day of our lives. And he does so out of love for us.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.