

“I have come that they may have life”: Jesus’ Concern for All

Sermon – January 11 2026

Good morning,

Last week during our sermon time I engaged us in a time of spiritual reading, inviting us to see how the scriptures that we read – with their varied characters and contexts – are not just stories locked in the ancient past but are instead stories through which God continues to speak to us today. And so last week not only did we consider the story of the Magi and their observation of the star in the sky, but we asked about the signs that God gives us in the things that we observe in our day; not only did we consider how Herod and all of Jerusalem was afraid at the news of a newborn King’s birth, but we also asked what it is that we fear as we go about trying to live out our lives; and not only did we consider the story of how two of John the Baptists disciples encountered Jesus one day, we also considered how Jesus encounters us today, asking us “What are you looking for?” and telling us to “come and see” where Jesus is abiding in our world today.

As we begin a new worship series reflecting on “Jesus’ concern for all” and Jesus’ mission to bring abundant life to all, we begin by exploring a central metaphor that Jesus used to describe himself: that of “The Good Shepherd.” This is a rich metaphor that was used by Jesus in a variety of ways throughout his ministry. Over the next several Sundays as we have guest speakers from a variety of organizations in the Waterloo Region who offer the care of the Good Shepherd to others—especially the vulnerable in our communities—I look forward to seeing how this metaphor of the Good Shepherd and the sheep of his care unfolds and extends for us in new and surprising ways. Hopefully we can practice spiritual readings of the stories we hear over the next Sundays, so we can discern how these are just as much stories about us as they were stories about Jesus’ first hearers.

Today we explore Jesus' use of the metaphor of the Good Shepherd in John chapter 10 where he tells the story or parable of the shepherd and his flock, and while we explore this passage, I would invite us to again "find ourselves" in the characters Jesus describes in this passage. Perhaps we've already begun to do this during experiencing the story, but now we can continue to do this. Did you notice that there are actually several characters in this story, each with their different actions or attitudes? There is, of course, the main character: the Good Shepherd, who Jesus identifies himself with. The Good Shepherd is described as one who shows concern and care towards the next character in the story, the sheep or the flock. So much does the Good Shepherd care, in fact, that he is willing to lay his life down for the sheep – to put himself in the way of danger and risk—all to protect and care for the flock.

The sheep, on the flip side, are identified as those who are vulnerable – who have need, need of food, shelter, safety, and belonging. The sheep are not self-sufficient. They are not able to make it on their own. They need the care and concern of the Good Shepherd if they are to have abundant life. They need protection, if they are to survive the realities embodied by the other, less savory characters in this passage. The other characters in this story are ones that we tend not to like to "find ourselves" identified with. We like to be the sheep, but what about the hired hand, for example? The hired hand is there to do a job but does it without the same "concern" or "care" shown by the Good Shepherd. The hired hand is there only to do their job and make a wage but doesn't really want that job to involve any skin in the game. As soon as any risk is involved in caring for the flock, the hired hand runs in the opposite direction, leaving the flock scattered. Jesus notes the problem with the hired hand: "the hired hand runs away because...[he] does not care for the sheep." Fear causes him to refuse the task of care.

Here, in this contrast between the hired hand and the Good Shepherd, a powerful revelation unfolds before us about the Good Shepherd: the type of care the Good Shepherd embodies is a type of care that is characterized by vulnerability too. Not only are the sheep vulnerable, but the Good Shepherd in his own way identifies himself with the vulnerable in standing in as a representative for them – in facing the realities that they face. The Good Shepherd could, in theory, leave the sheep to fend for themselves when the going gets tough, but instead chooses to be with the sheep and tend to their need, even if it means laying down his life. He gives not from his own *invulnerability*, but out of his vulnerability. This reveals a profound truth about the care that the Good Shepherd gives to the flock: the care experienced in their relationship occurs through mutual vulnerability. Henri Nouwen, I think, captures best the care of the Good Shepherd: “To care one must offer one’s own vulnerable self to others as a source of healing.” (*Aging*, 97) This is what the hired hand chooses to run away from: care offered through one’s own vulnerable presence.

What other characters appear in this story? There is also the “wolf”, the one who preys over the flock, waiting for an opportunity to strike. Interestingly, this word for wolf in John 10 appears in the Greek translation of Proverbs 28:15 in the context of one who rules over poor and needy people:

“A growling lion, and a thirsty wolf, is the wicked ruler over a poor people.”

In the Hebrew and most other translations the thirsty wolf here is instead called a prowling bear, but really the same point is being made. Here another dimension to Jesus’ metaphor unfolds and that is the context of leadership or those who wield power over others. The Good Shepherd is depicted in terms that are the inverse of the wolf. Where the wolf becomes a metaphor for the predatory behaviour of corrupt leaders or rulers, using power to scatter the flock and feed off the

flock's life for its own benefit, the Good Shepherd uses power to keep the flock together and feed the flock for the benefit *of* the whole flock. The wolf takes advantage of the flock's vulnerability, while the shepherd nurtures the flock within the context of a relationship of mutual vulnerability.

The wolf appears in John 10 in parallel fashion to another character mentioned earlier in the passage (but not read in the scripture reading this morning), namely the thief. The thief intentionally steals the flock away from the Shepherd, taking what does not belong to them for their own gain. Again, the thief is one who appears here as a figure of someone who chooses to hide from their own vulnerability by taking from the vulnerable.¹ The thief figures in a variety of ways in Jesus' teachings, and often, we should note, in the context of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God. Take, for example, Luke 12:33, where Jesus teaches about money and possessions, instructing his disciples:

Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where *no thief* comes near and no moth destroys.

With this passage in mind, we might see the thief as the figure of one who stores up possessions, trying again to stave off the vulnerability of being the needy flock of God. In John 10, Jesus speaks harshly of the actions of the thief:

the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

The thief not only takes what isn't theirs, but by taking it, causes destruction. The Good Shepherd, on the other hand, gives – gives abundant life.

Where are we in this rich story and metaphor? One of the wonders of moving through a passage of scripture like this by way of a spiritual reading is that, if we are honest, we can “find ourselves” in each of these characters in our own way. We may *not want to* find ourselves in all

¹ The notion of “hiding” from vulnerability was influenced by my reading of Nouwen's *Aging*.

of them, but we can indeed find ourselves in each of them. What would that look like, I wonder? While I would encourage each of us to do our own reflecting on this through our own personal reflection, I will nonetheless make some suggestions as to how we might find ourselves in each of these characters. Why don't we start with the most popular one to pick: the flock, the sheep of God's fold.

To be sure, we can find ourselves in the character of the vulnerable flock under the care of God the Good Shepherd. Indeed, I think it is crucial that we see ourselves *honestly, authentically* in the character of the vulnerable, needy flock, if we are to avoid embodying the qualities of the hired hand, the wolf, or the thief of the story. What do I mean by this? I don't think it is too extreme to say that *a perennial temptation of Christians, especially those of us who are privileged economically and socially, is to identify with the vulnerable, needy flock while, practically speaking, doing everything we can to avoid the risk of vulnerability that comes with truly living under God's care experienced through relationships of interdependence (I'll say that again).

So much of our lives in this Western, fast paced world, involves us in the effort to secure our independence and our self-sufficiency. We want to be a sheep that can do quite fine on its own, thank you very much. We don't want to be a burden. But, ironically, by seeking this kind of independence, we are only really hiding from our own real vulnerability as sheep in God's care. I think one of the goals of Jesus' use of this metaphor is precisely to begin to help us see how important vulnerability is to the life of faith. We should strive to be the vulnerable flock of God's care – modelling relationships of mutual vulnerability and interdependence. Read spiritually, the scriptures might be asking us: "Where are we refusing the call to be part of the flock? Where are we hiding from our vulnerability, or from the vulnerability of others around us?"

Next, if we are honest, we can find ourselves in the character of the hired hand. The hired hand is called to care for the flock on behalf of the Shepherd – the hired hand is supposed to imitate the care of the Good Shepherd. The hired hand might especially be seen as a figure for leaders and care givers – leaders and care givers in church communities, like Pastors, Elders, or others, who seek to provide care in imitation of the Good Shepherd, or leaders in other contexts like government or organizations. Jesus’ words about the hired hand strike deep to those of us who are in such positions. Are we prepared to provide care to others when the going gets tough? Even more: are we ready to recognize and share our own vulnerabilities as we seek to provide care to others? Where are we running away from the risks of relationship because of fear?

Next, if we are honest, we can find ourselves in the character of the wolf. Where, in our relationships, are we only taking and not giving? Where are our appetites and desires being sated at the expense of others that are in need in our community? Might God be calling us to “lay that wolf down” with the lamb, so that we might become mutually dependant on God together with others, seeing our needs truly met only together with the rest of the flock?

Next, we can find ourselves in the character of the thief. Where is our relationship to possessions and worldly wealth causing destruction? To others and to the world around us? Where are we storing up for ourselves that which will pass away? Might God be calling us to discover a different form of abundance and life than what the world offers through the endless products and things on offer? When we embody the attitudes and actions of the thief, we become, as the wonderful hymn “God of Grace and God of Glory,” puts it: “rich in things but poor in soul.” Where in our lives is God calling us to embrace the abundance and riches of God’s life in relationships of interdependence?

A central practice that Christians have attempted to embody with varying success throughout history has been the practice of “poverty.” Poverty, to be clear, can refer to an actual state of lack with respect to possessions and wealth, but it can also refer to a quality of heart.

Quoting again from Henri Nouwen:

“Poverty is the quality of the heart which makes us relate to life, not as property to be defended but as a gift to be shared. Poverty is the constant willingness to say good-bye to yesterday and move forward to new, unknown experiences. Poverty is the inner understanding that the hours, days, weeks, and years do not belong to us but are the gentle reminders of our call to give, not only love and work, but life itself, to those who follow us and will take our place.” (*Aging*, 106)

The character flaw of the thief is not only that they store up treasures but that in doing so they lack the quality of heart that sees life as a gift to be shared. The Good Shepherd gives life itself because he understands that life is a gift to be shared among the flock.

Next, and finally, as we close these reflections, can we consider that we are the Good Shepherd of the story, or at least called to imitate the Good Shepherd? In the last Sunday of this series, we will look at John 21:15-17, where the resurrected Jesus asks Peter if he loves him and then instructs him to feed his lambs and tend his sheep. The Good Shepherd gives life abundant to the flock that the flock might also embody the characteristics of the Good Shepherd. We, too, can embody the love, the care and concern, the vulnerability of the Good Shepherd, for he has left us an example to be followed and has given us the Spirit to empower us for this task. May it be so. May we take time over the weeks ahead to consider Jesus’ care and concern for all – for us in our often-hidden vulnerability and for other, more visibly vulnerable folks around us in our communities. May we be willing to share our own vulnerabilities, seeing them not as a liability, but as the source of our healing and the healing of others. May we let go of our fears and our

appetites for things that do not satisfy. And may we find rest in the green pastures of the Good Shepherd, who cares for us, and has come to give all life, life abundant. AMEN