

John 10: 11-18 – “*More than a Metaphor*”  
Easter 4B – April 14, 2024

A metaphor is a figure of speech used to describe one thing in terms of another. It's a comparison of characteristics. We use a lot of animal metaphors. Life is a *rat race*. When a crime occurs we want to know if the perpetrator is part of a larger group or if he is a *lone wolf*. When financial trends are strong on Wall Street we say it is a *bull market*. A person may be *busy as a beaver*; *happy as a lark* or *hungry as a horse*. You get the idea. It's no surprise to us that a common metaphor in Holy Scripture is that the people of God are described as *sheep*, and the One whom God sent into the world to redeem and care for us is described as the Shepherd. The metaphor of sheep and Shepherd brings comfort because it reminds us that even though we are vulnerable, we are loved and cared for by our Good Shepherd.

Let's consider the first part of that assertion. We are vulnerable. That's really a summary of all the negative characteristics we sometimes hear about sheep. Being vulnerable means that we are confronted with many dangers from which we are not fully equipped to defend ourselves. Sheep, after all, are not fierce fighters. They don't have the size of an elephant; the strength of a bear; the jaws of a shark; or the claws of a tiger. Many of the threats to our status as sheep of the Good Shepherd are external; they are outside of us; they are worldly, not under our control. Yet because this world has been impacted by sin, we are vulnerable, and those events impact us to such a degree that we might doubt or lose our faith. Satan, our foe who roams about like a roaring lion tries to use them to his advantage.

How often when a catastrophe strikes – like floods, fires, tornadoes, tsunamis, or earthquakes – don't we hear questions arise about the power of God or the love of God? Why didn't He stop this from happening? Doesn't He care for us? And the unspoken, sinful assumption that Satan plants in our mind is that if this is how God treats you, you are better off without Him. Doubt, anger and unbelief can be compounded when the tragedy or setbacks strike us personally: when it's our house that is flooded, burned down, or blown away; when it's our body that suffers a debilitating illness; when it's our job that is part of the company downsizing; or when it's our loved one who dies in the prime of life. It's in just those moments when we need the secure embrace of the Shepherd the most, that we might desire it the least. We turn our back on Him and become sheep who have gone astray. In addition to that, of course, we are vulnerable to the sins of our own making. Later in this chapter Jesus says, “*My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me.*” If we turn a deaf ear to our Good Shepherd and desire to live life our way, to ignore His Law which is like the “fence” of a pasture to protect us; to continue in our sin, and to separate ourselves from the places where He feeds us – the still waters and green pastures of His Word and Sacraments, we become not only wandering sheep, but sitting ducks – vulnerable to false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice, culminating in a rejection of the Shepherd Himself.

The Shepherd must sometimes use His rod and staff to correct and admonish us. Those instruments might seem like a club or a weapon, but they are used for our good. They are meant to guide, guard, and protect us. Our Lord's purpose is that we turn from our wandering and come back to the safety of the Sheepfold and look again at Him who says, *"I am the good Shepherd."*

That leads us to the second half of our central thought for today: we are vulnerable, but we are loved and cared for. The metaphor of a sheep reminds us of our sin; but the metaphor of the Shepherd reminds us of His sacrifice. We heard Jesus say that the Good Shepherd *"lays down His life for the sheep."* He emphasizes that by saying it twice in the verses before us today. And then He adds in verse 18, *"I lay it down of my own accord."* What an astounding statement that is. Our Savior was not forced to suffer and die for us. He wanted to. He was not coerced by any demand of His Father but compelled by His love for us. It was the only way to win the world's salvation; and He was the only One who could do it. Peter rightly says, *"And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."* You've heard this before, but it bears repeating: the Son of God, the Good Shepherd, became the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Jesus says not only that He *"lays down His life,"* but also that He will *"take it up again."* He didn't stay in the grave. That's why this Sunday falls in the Easter season. He lives to continue to guide and care for His flock until they are all safely home. In today's collect we prayed, *"Almighty God, merciful Father, since You have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know Him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads."* He leads, we follow. When you are in a rough spot in life remember that. You're not going it alone. You have someone who cares for you, who knows who, who calls you by name, who loved you so much that He died for you and rose again. He's not going to leave or forsake you. There might be adversity along the way, but He'll get you through it, and use that adversity for your betterment. And your final destination is not the valley of the shadow of death. No, because of His work, goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life, and you will dwell in His house forevermore. How do we know this? Because He says it. Because He has made it a reality for us and given us the privileged position of being a sheep of His flock.

In today's world, being compared to a sheep isn't always a compliment. It means that we mindlessly follow others without doing any thinking or evaluating on our own. For the Christian with Christ, however, it's a good thing, because He is loving, dependable, and totally trustworthy. Being His sheep is more than a metaphor; it is a blessed reality. Amen.

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