

**“I Am the Good Shepherd”**  
**John 10:1-18**  
**Third Sunday of Lent**  
**February 24, 2008**

*“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary...I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own sheep and my sheep know me.” John 10:11, 14 The Message*

We are such a skittish bunch of people. We worry over just about everything. Family, finances, food, and future—is there anything in this world that we don’t worry about? It doesn’t matter who we are, how much money we make, or how old we happen to be—we seem to be people who worry. A few years ago, Time magazine conducted a \$15 million study on the leading causes of suicide among young people. After reviewing hundreds of cases and interviewing thousands of people, the authors came to the conclusion that plain old worry was the leading cause of suicide among 15-24 year olds in America. Now this is not anxiety that I am referring to, not that clinical disorder that affects up to 19 million Americans every year. I am talking common, old fashioned, everyday worry; the worry so often exhibited by folks like good old Charlie Brown, who once said, “I’ve developed a new philosophy...I dread only one day at a time.” Or as another liked to say, “Today is the tomorrow we worried about yesterday.” Know anyone like that? Is that person you? Kids, cars, cash, colds...is there anything we do not worry about? Oh yes, we are a skittish bunch of people. In many respects, we are just like sheep.

There is a classic devotional book entitled A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23. Perhaps you have read it. Phillip Keller grew up in East Africa, in an area where most of the indigenous people raised sheep. From his experience and friendships with shepherds, he writes that it is almost impossible for sheep to lie down and rest unless four basic requirements are met. Those basic requirements are as follows:

*Owing to their timidity they refuse to lie down unless they are free from all fear.  
Because of the social behavior within a flock sheep will not lie down unless they are free  
from friction with others of their kind.*

*If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down. Only when they are free from pests can they relax.*

*Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food. They must be free from hunger.<sup>1</sup>*

City boy and “Beef State” resident that I am, I guess I will have to take Keller’s word on that particular subject. Sheep will not rest until all their worry is put aside. Sort of sounds like us, doesn’t it? Is there anything that we don’t worry about? Is there any time during the day or the night that our internal worry machine is not on? The fact that it is probably is the reason that so many of us walk around with those big bags under our eyes. Keller also writes that sheep will also not rest until they know that they are not in danger. Even the slightest agitation can scatter them all over creation. Once again, sort of like us, right? Whether we see a Mid-eastern traveler walking through an airport or a Mid-western mayor promoting a new ballpark, we jump at the slightest hint of trouble. We are quick to picture the absolute worst that can happen in just about everything. We panic before trouble even appears. Oh yes, we are a worrisome people. We worry about our safety. We worry about our security. We worry about our sanity. Perhaps it is for these reasons and so many more that we discover that Jesus said to those who would listen, “I am the Good Shepherd.”

Now please let me remind you once again that during the season of Lent, we are exploring some of the “I am” says of our Lord. Found only in the gospel of John, Jesus took common, everyday images and used them to give us not only a fuller understanding of him, but a fuller understanding of ourselves as well. These familiar sayings help us to know what it takes to live that abundant, fully satisfying life for which every one of us longs. And by looking at the “I am” sayings during the season of Lent, by trying to comprehend what Jesus is telling us, by remembering that he said, “I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the way, the truth, and the life,” I believe we can experience an Easter unlike any we have ever known. Today we get to “double dip.” As you heard me say just a moment ago, Jesus said “I am the

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Keller, [A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23](#), Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1970, p. 35

Good Shepherd” twice in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John. Not only that, between those two sayings, Jesus also says, “I am the gate of the sheep.” We need to get busy and see what all this means.

Let’s start by remembering just where these words happen to be located. The story that surrounds these familiar sayings is a continuation of the discussion that Jesus had with the Pharisees after he healed the man born blind. We talked about that story last week. You may remember how the Pharisees had objected to this particular man being healed, because Jesus did so on the Sabbath. By objecting like they did, they had moved into that same darkness from which the man had just emerged. Taking his cue from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel who used images of shepherds and their sheep, he condemned the Pharisees thinking. But there is so much more here than just harsh words for those “shepherds” that did not get it. There is something here for us “sheep” as well. And it begins when Jesus uses the image of the sheepfold.

Now according to what I learned back in Sunday School, in Jesus’ day shepherds would often bring their flocks down from the hills each night and put them in a communal sheepfold that was located on the outskirts of town. As most of us are more familiar with cattle than sheep, we might imagine the sheepfold as a corral. Anyway, there would only be one way into and out of the sheepfold and that was through the gate. There was a gatekeeper, of course, who knew each of the shepherds that had sheep within the fold. His primary job was to make sure that only those who were supposed to be in that sheepfold got in. Anyone who tried to get in by another way was considered to be a thief and a bandit. They had only come, of course, to steal the sheep. And more than likely, if one of those thieves or bandits did get in, the sheep would get spooked. Remember that sheep are a skittish bunch. They worry over just about everything. Chaos, possibly even death, could result if the flock were panicked by an intruder—if, in fact, one was allowed to get in. By proclaiming that “I am the gate,” Jesus is not only saying that he is the only way to get in and out of the fold, not only saying that he is the protector of the sheep inside the fold, but also saying that he is the one who can put the minds to the sheep and their owners at ease simply by his presence. With Jesus at the

sheep gate, that is just one less thing that needs to be worried about. To all of those still hanging around after the blind man's healing, our Lord said, "I am the gate of the sheep."

And while that image is very important, he went on to say even more. After talking about the gate and all of its implications, Jesus turned his attention to shepherds. He said that there are basically two kinds: those who have some kind of personal investment in the sheep and those hired hands who are simply working for a paycheck. In his book, Phillip Keller tells us that sheep have little or no means of self-defense against the many predators that seek to do them harm. Coyotes, cougars, bears, wolves, wild dogs, and—probably the most dreaded of them all—sheep rustlers, all are out to get the various members of the flock. And because that is so, the sheep need to be protected. Now a "good shepherd" will defend his flock. Because he has that personal investment in the flock, he will do everything possible to keep the sheep safe. Hired hands, however, those who have no investment in the flock, tend to run at the slightest hint of danger. And when they do, they leave the sheep exposed to the dangers at hand. Do you remember when the shepherd boy David stood before King Saul and explained why he was the best choice to go out and face the warrior Goliath. Way back in I Samuel, David said, "*Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it.*" David, you see, had an investment in the flock. The sheep belonged to his father and were a part of his family's livelihood. Even though he was just a boy, he did not abandon the flock at the first sign of trouble. Instead of running away, he did everything he could to protect his sheep. And in so doing, he gave us the example of what a true shepherd of the sheep is supposed to be.

Jesus said, 'I am the Good Shepherd.' He is the one who defends the sheep. Please note that in describing himself in this fashion, Jesus implies that trouble is sure to come. By saying that he is the Good Shepherd, Jesus reminds us that life in the flock is not always peaceful. Whether the members of the flock are up in the pasture or down in the fold, it is not easy to be a sheep. Every day there are dangers. Every day there are

threats. Every day those things happen that could bring harm to the members of the flock. But the good shepherd watches out for the sheep. Because he has an investment in the flock, because they are the sheep of his pasture, because every lamb, yearling, ewe, or ram is precious to him, the Good Shepherd does everything he can to protect them, even to the point of laying down his life so that those that he loves might live. And from my reading, sheep are smart enough to know when they are in the presence of such a shepherd, when they see that his rod and staff are in hand, when they know their shepherd is willing to go with them even through the valley of the shadow of death, they are comforted.

In those first 18 verse of chapter 10 of John, Jesus said, “I am the gate’ and “I am the Good Shepherd.” And then, just in case we didn’t hear it the first time, Jesus uttered that second “I am” saying once more. “I am the Good Shepherd.” Do the members of this flock understand what all of that means? Are you able to comprehend how those words should affect your worry-riddled life? Bill Self is the pastor of Johns Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Georgia. Several years ago, he wrote the following: “*Sometimes at 3:30 in the morning I get that tug at the shoulder, ‘Come on, Bill, let’s get up and worry.’*” Know anyone like that? Do his words sound familiar? Have you ever answered that tug on the shoulder in the middle of the night and began to worry? You need to know that while it is perfectly understandable if you have, it is also perfectly reprehensible if you do—especially if you are a person of faith. For by doing so you ignore everything that you have been taught from the very beginning of your faith journey. More than likely, one of the very first things that you learned about God was that verse which proclaimed, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Perhaps you have sat through Handel’s great oratorio The Messiah and been moved as the Alto stood up and began to sing, “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; and he shall gather his lambs with his arm.” Or maybe you have walked down the Sunday School hall right here at Elkhorn Hills and been touched by that picture of the shepherd reaching down the cliff to rescue that lone sheep that has strayed and fallen. I am almost certain that Bill Self has experienced all of that as well. And that is why he went on to write that when that tug on the shoulder does come: “*I’ve gotten to the place where I say, ‘No, I have a Good Shepherd stationed at the door. He is*

*the peace of God, and is going to protect me. I am part of his flock for whom he would give his life.' [And] nine times out of 10 I will get the best night's sleep from then on.*"<sup>2</sup>

Oh, we may be a people who worry, but why? Our Lord said to anyone who would listen, "I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And then he also said once again, "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me... And I lay my life down for the sheep." My sisters and brothers, my fellow members of the flock, if you understand that, if you let those words of his sink down into the very depths of your soul, then the words that you have known since you have been a child will make sense like they never have before:

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;  
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

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<sup>2</sup> From a sermon by the Rev. Dr. William L. Self entitled, "Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear," [www.day1.net](http://www.day1.net)