

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

*“I am the Good Shepherd,”* Jesus begins our Gospel lesson today, but the Shepherd motif — that’s a word that several of the men heard Dr. Pulse use last Wednesday — the Shepherd motif doesn’t begin in verse 11. You can find the shepherd motif running throughout the Scripture in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms. That shouldn’t be surprising after what we heard Jesus teach last Sunday. And it continues after Jesus in the apostolic writings all the way to Revelation.

And as we listen to Jesus today, we should note that He sets the stage in the first part of John chapter 10 for His grand “I am” announcement. There He tells us that true shepherds enter by the door of the sheep pen, that the sheep listen to the voice of their shepherds as they lead the sheep out to find good pasture, and that the sheep follow them, so that they might *“have life and have it abundantly”* (John 10:10).

Jesus then distinguishes Himself from these shepherds, and a verse later from the hirelings that are no shepherds at all. *“I am the Good Shepherd,”* He says. But of what does this goodness consist? It is not that He does the job of shepherding better than every other shepherd. It is not that the Good Shepherd is just the most competent of the shepherds that only if the other shepherds would follow His example, they too could become good.

Quite the opposite. In fact, the Good Shepherd is good because He does the very thing that no other shepherd would do, for it would be foolishness! *“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

Think about it. What would happen if the ordinary shepherd were to offer up his life unto death to the wolf? What then would happen to the sheep? It’s obvious! The wolf would have a feast with them, scattering them, and snatching them one by one to devour them. For the Good Shepherd to offer up His life for the sheep is just absurd, yet that’s what makes Him good.

And this is what contrasts the Good Shepherd from others who claim to be a shepherd in the same way, in the same class. These may have been the pagan teachers of the day, presenting the false gods of the Greeks or Romans. They may have been the self-centered shepherds, false prophets that fattened themselves and not their sheep, that allowed them to be scattered and become prey for the wolves (Ezek. 34).

These are surely the shepherds who today similarly cause doubts to arise in the hearts of the sheep by teaching falsely. You know who these are. These are the ones who call themselves Christian pastors but who can’t seem to mention Jesus in their sermons, or cross, or resurrection. These are the ones who preach that trying your best is good enough, and God will reward you for your efforts. Or that real

Christianity has nothing to do with whether Jesus rose from the dead or not — or whether you believe it, but it's only about what you do. These are the ones who claim that the abundant life that Jesus talks about in the verse before our Gospel is abundance in the earthly things: money and power, health and physical comfort. The false anti-gospels are legion!

And, to be sure, there are sheep who will wander off even with pure preaching — we know sheep love to wander. For example, some sheep today are offended by Jesus' teaching that following Him is the only way to the Father (John 14:6). For Jesus not only teaches us that His sheep hear His voice and follow Him, but also that following other voices does not lead to the Father. "*No one comes to the Father except through [Him]*" (John 14:6). Again, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, says, "*there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*"

Sheep are wooed away by listening to other voices, popular voices that would rather scratch itching ears than speak the unpopular message of Jesus. Sheep will often listen to the soothing voices of modern gurus like Oprah who once said, "One of the mistakes that human beings make is believing that there is only one way to live, and that we don't accept that there are ... many paths to what you call God." "There couldn't possibly be just one way!" Or like Joel Osteen: "I believe that Jesus is the way to the one God, but there are many paths to Jesus" — what does that mean? Or Deepak Chopra, a new-age, eastern guru who thinks Jesus was just about teaching us how to attain a Christ consciousness like He had, a kind of "spiritual enlightenment." Referring to John 10, a bit later than our text, where the Jews picked up stones to kill Jesus for making Himself out to be God, Chopra said, "And then [Jesus] explains that, you know, the state of consciousness that he is in is possible for anyone and everyone."

And all of it sounds so "spiritual but not religious" that is popular today. But it is deadly! It's almost too hard to tell if these people are the hirelings or the wolves! Beware! There may be little difference. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount taught: "*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves*" (Matt. 7:15). St. Paul similarly taught "*I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them*" (Acts 20:29-30). Perhaps, the difference is that hirelings have been placed in charge of sheep, and the wolves haven't. Perhaps. Either way, they cooperate to harm Jesus' sheep. Beware! Tune your ears to listen for Jesus' voice.

For the sheep belong to Jesus. He says, "*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.*" They are Jesus', for Jesus won them as He laid "down

*[his] life for the sheep.*” This is what the Father sent Jesus to do, and Jesus did it willingly. *“No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”* And so the Father is well-pleased; and He loves the Son; and not just because Jesus laid down His life, but because He took it back up again.

This, too, makes this Shepherd stand out from any other shepherd, for no other shepherd could sacrifice his own life and later be there for His flock, to *“[make us] lie down in green pastures,”* to *“[lead us] beside still waters,”* to *“[lead us] in paths of righteousness,”* to *“comfort [us].”* No other shepherd could for His church *“prepare a table”* for us at which to feast on His sacrificed but living body, or give a cup overflowing with the forgiveness that comes by His blood. No other shepherd by laying down His life could anoint us with the oil of gladness, for we know, indeed, that only He could take it back up in victory. Only this Shepherd, the Good One.

And this Shepherd is good because He laid down His life not just for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but also for *“other sheep that are not of [that] fold,”* that is, for us Gentiles, who *“listen to [His] voice.”* And we are here as a testimony that *“God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him,”* that, *“everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name”* (Acts 10:34, 43). It’s by listening to the voice of our Shepherd that He has brought us into His flock, and we know that only by continuing to listen to His voice that we will be called *“the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand”* (Ps. 95:7).

Therefore, O flock at Zion, listen for the voice of your Shepherd, though here at Zion it may sound like mine. But you’ll know it belongs to the Good Shepherd when you hear of Him who laid down His life for you and took it back up again. Listen for Him. Bleat out your thanks and praises. And pray, O Jesus, Good Shepherd, *“save your people and bless your heritage! Be [our] shepherd and carry [us] forever”* (Ps. 28:9). Let Your *“goodness and mercy ... follow [us] all the days of [our] life,”* and take us at length to dwell in Your house forever.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.