

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

4th Sunday Lent

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March 15, 2015

Text: John 10:11-18

Title: “The God We Can Know: Knowing God’s Care”

One of the things I learned about Native American ways has to do with hunting. Whenever an animal was killed it was done not for sport but to put food in the mouths of the people: family, friends, neighbors. And when the hunter came upon the freshly killed animal, it was customary to thank the animal for giving its life that others may continue to live. It is one of the gifts from Native Americans that is so profoundly respectful of life which I find meaningful and rich. So every time I’m successful in hunting deer that has been my practice: thank the deer for giving its life that my family and friends--and I--can continue to live.

Reminds me of a story. Eleven people were hanging on a rope under a helicopter, 10 men and one woman. The rope was not strong enough to carry them all, so they decided that one had to leave. Otherwise they were all going to fall. They weren’t able to decide who that person would be, however, until the woman gave a very touching speech. She said that she would voluntarily let go of the rope, because, as a woman, she was used to giving up everything for her husband and kids, or for men in general, and was used to always making sacrifices with little in return. As soon as she finished her speech, all the men started clapping Sometimes life is about sacrifice.

Yet, sacrifice doesn’t seem to be our go-to behavior most oftentimes. We are built, it seems, for self-preservation and self-protection. We want and need to take care of ourselves, our loved ones, our own people. How many times I’ve heard people say, “We need to take care of our own first. Why are we helping people on the other side of the world when we have needs right here?”

Or maybe we are so anxious about our own lives and circumstances that we struggle to let go of our own self-preoccupations long enough in order to consider what it might mean to sacrifice on behalf of other people. Did you know that some consider the United States “the planet’s undisputed worry champion”? According to one article on the subject from Slate Magazine:

Around the turn of the millennium, anxiety flew past depression as the most prominent mental health issue in America, and it's never looked back: With more than 18 percent of adults suffering from an anxiety disorder in any given year, the United States is now the most anxious nation in the world, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Stress-related ailments cost the nation \$300 billion every year in medical

bills and lost productivity, while our usage of sedative drugs keeps skyrocketing; just between 1997 and 2004, Americans more than doubled their spending on anti-anxiety medications like Xanax and Valium, from \$900 million to \$2.1 billion. And this anxious strain hits us well before we reach college. As psychologist Robert Leahy points out: "The average high school kid today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s."

http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/01/its_not_the_job_market.2.html

Apparently, we worry. A lot. We don't have to agree with all of these claims to know that. It's in the air. So how does our faith address our human condition?

Last week, we heard Jesus' saying in John, "I am the light of the world," and learned that Jesus spoke these words during the Festival of Booths and that this was probably an illusion to God as the One who guided the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt to freedom as God guided them in the form of a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. He also spoke these words in John with the intensifying threat to his own life by the religious authorities who were constantly challenging him.

After Jesus said, "I am the light of the world", the Gospel According to John shifts to a story of Jesus healing a man born blind. Jesus gives him sight and the religious leaders known as the Pharisees interrogate the poor man multiple times in an effort to discredit Jesus, finally telling the man that he was born in sin. The story ends with Jesus accusing the Pharisees of spiritual blindness.

So we have a sequence of Jesus as the light of the world who gives sight to a man born blind and then immediately after accusing the Pharisees of being spiritually blind, Jesus compares himself to a good shepherd in contrast to hired hands and thieves.

Let's think about the shepherd and the sheep. First, the shepherd. In Israel, traveling by bus from one of the holy sites to the next, buses pass through the hills of Judea in the south part of the country and the rolling green hills of the Galilee region in the north, and often times as you're traveling you will see sheep on the hillsides with their shepherds, and always—if the flock is moving—the shepherd is out front leading. Never behind herding like cattle driving cowboys, but out front. Sheep follow their leader. They don't need to be driven from behind. The leader, therefore, has the life of the flock in his or her hands because in the words of the old hymn "where he leads me I will follow." That is the way of shepherd and sheep.

The job of the shepherd was and is not exactly prestigious. They weren't and aren't the doctors, lawyers and engineers of the occupational world. Rather, as one commentator suggested, being a shepherd was considered dangerous, risky and menial. For Jesus to say "I am the good shepherd" might be more akin to saying "I am the good migrant worker" in our time and culture. It wasn't a highly prized career option for the young.

Yet in John's Gospel, Jesus uses it as a metaphor to describe the relationship between him and those who follow him, those who want to adopt his life as their own, those who choose to be part of the community who follow him.

The shepherd has a responsibility for the flock and yet also for the individual members of the flock. As Jesus said in Luke's Gospel:

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? (Luke 15:4)

The Good Shepherd cares for the whole of the flock but also will leave the flock for those who have strayed and find themselves lost.

For the shepherd there are clearly fearful threats outside the fold, the wolves of fear can scatter the flock and kill on a whim. Members of the flock can worry and panic, especially if it's clear that the one leading will panic and run at the first sign of trouble, the first sign that the wolves of fear are coming. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus does not run in fear leaving the sheep to fend for themselves against the fierce fangs of hungry wolves. Instead, he lays down his life. He will sacrifice his life for the good of the flock. He will pay the ultimate price on behalf of others. And in so doing, he says to Philip—one of his close disciples--later in John's Gospel as the threat to his life becomes so intense that he prepares his disciples for his own death:

“Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?
Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. [John 14:9](#)

Just to be clear, Jesus tells his opponents later in chapter 10 of John:

“The Father and I are one.” John 10:30

God is a self-sacrificing God. How does it strike you to think that God as Jesus is willing to give up his life for us? When the wolves of worry instill anxiety and fear in us, God as Jesus is willing to step in and demonstrate that loving the flock is about sacrificing himself out of the love that God has for the flock. What if, when worry strikes us, we trusted this was so? What if, when we panic within, we were able to claim the gift of Christ who proclaims “I lay down my life for the sheep”? What effect would that have on our worrying if we were able and willing to trust the One we seek to follow?

Last week, the team who is exploring a possible sanctuary renovation met with an architect who has experience and training in designing worship spaces. He told us at one point in our conversation that he read the history of the church on our website and indicated that this congregation has a long history of embracing changes in its facilities in order to meet changing needs. It began 141 years ago when Henry Baldwin deeded the current property to the church for \$10. A sanctuary was built and dedicated here in 1875 and part of that first building now hangs in the fellowship hall with that date visible to any who care to look. In 1956 a dining hall was added to the church and then just 8 short years later the congregation decided to tear down the old sanctuary and build a new one on site. The last service was held in that old building on February 16, 1964: 51 years ago. Next Sunday will mark the 51st anniversary of the groundbreaking ceremony held for this sanctuary in which we are worshipping this morning.

Then, in 1980, the present fellowship hall was added, along with the offices for pastor and secretary. Sixteen years later, in 1996, the elevator project that cost nearly as much as the building of the sanctuary at a cost of \$125,886 was approved and eventually paid for. I remember being here after being asked by our district superintendent, Jeff Regan, to come and preside at the church conference at which you debated and approved that project.

In 2006 the Memorial Garden was dedicated. And just a few years ago we added the multimedia equipment and a handicap accessible bathroom to this floor.

I all of this, I have heard that there is some worrying going on about possible changes made to this beloved sanctuary, and it's understandable. People have worshipped in this space for some 50 years as it is. Baptisms, weddings, funerals and conversions have happened in this space as it is. Important life events have happened in this space for so many of you. Yet, it's also clear that this congregation has a long history of trusting the Good Shepherd when the worry that accompanies change visits the flock. Even at one point the congregation had the courage and the faith to tear down a sanctuary in order to make way for something newer, larger and more attractive, something almost unheard of in the history of most churches. It demonstrated incredible courage and faith on this congregation's part to do such a radical thing. But that change was carried out--and all the others, too--as a result of this congregation's desire to invite more people to become part of the flock or to make it easier for people to become part of the flock. You trusted the Good Shepherd when fear and worry could have stopped the mission cold. The motivations for the changes being explored now are no different, and of course—as in the past--nothing will happen without the support of the flock anyway.

Jesus went on to say in this story from John, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice.” I find it fascinating and beautiful that Jesus leaves the door completely open to others not identified in his current flock in John's Gospel. Jesus never stops embracing more sheep, wanting more sheep to join the fold, other sheep for whom Jesus equally lays down his life. The beautiful thing about all of this is that Jesus doesn't seek to get anything out of the sheep—he simply lays down his life for them.

Isn't it comforting to know that you are valued and have worth in God's eyes as one of the flock? God is willing to sacrifice on your behalf and mine. This Word of God is really all about who the shepherd is and what the shepherd does more than it is about you and me. You are valued and important as a result of who the shepherd is. God's nature is to love through sacrifice.

So given the worry-warts we so often are over various matters in our lives, isn't it worth trusting Christ who comes with a word of comfort, a word of grace, that as the Good Shepherd he will lay down his life for us? Indeed, he has already done so, and in that supreme act we know God's profound love for each and for all, including those who are not yet a part of the flock. What a gift it is to know there are more to come, more to know, and more with whom to share this journey of faith in following the Good Shepherd.

One: When we find ourselves wondering how we are expected to navigate this confusing, intimidating world, help us to remember that we are not alone because Jesus says,

All: “I am the Good Shepherd.”

One: When we feel tempted to stray from our communities, to try to make it on our own without the help of those who care about us, remind us that we are never out of your care when Jesus tells us,

All: "I am the Good Shepherd."

One: When we take a risk and venture out alone anyway, remind us that there is no distance we can wander that God is not still guarding and holding us close when Jesus says,

All: "I am the Good Shepherd."

One: When we're too tired to do or to think anymore, help us to remember to rest and feel safe under the keep of Jesus, who says,

All: "I am the Good Shepherd." Amen.