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Easter IV
April 21, 2024
Text: John 10:11 – 18
Title: What Am I?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. I'd like to begin this morning by asking each of you to think about the Bible for a couple of minutes. I know, big shock for me to ask you to think about the Bible in a sermon, but I want you to consider it in a specific way. In your time of reading and hopefully studying God's Word as we have been given it in the Holy Bible, what verses or phrases of comfort do you remember most? At times of difficulty in your life, what comes to your mind from God's Word? Take a minute or two to think about it.

We all know that the Scriptures contain many comforting Words from our loving God, and if I were to go around the sanctuary here this morning I'm sure that we would hear many comforting verses and phrases that you remember. But now, as you think about those Words of comfort that you chose, did any of them talk about who God is? Think about that for a minute. In times of trouble in this world, why don't we consider God's descriptions of Himself as comforting words? We're much more likely to turn to passages like Psalm 23 which is certainly comforting, but it's more of a description of what God does for us as opposed to who He is.

And that's where I want to take you in today's sermon. How does the Lord's descriptions of Himself give us comfort, especially in today's Gospel from John 10? In the Gospel According to St. John we are given a number of descriptions about who Jesus is, and therefore what the Lord God has to say about Himself. In chapter 6 Jesus says that "I am the bread of life." In chapter 8 He says that "I am the Light of the world"; "I am from above"; "I am He" and that "...before Abraham was, I am." That last one doesn't mean a whole lot to us right

away, but when Jesus said it to the Jews in the temple; they wanted to execute Him then and there because to them it was a blatant claim of Divinity and it was blasphemy to their ears.

Those are just the statements found in chapters 6 and 8 of John's Gospel. In chapter 10, Jesus says that "I am the door of the sheep" and that "I am the Good Shepherd." Chapter 11 has Him saying, "I am the resurrection and the life" to Mary and Martha just before He raises Lazarus from the dead. In chapter 13 Jesus says that "...you call me teacher and Lord, so I am." Then in the next chapter, He says those wonderful words that can very often be heard at a Christian's funeral, "I am the way, the truth and the life," and later on in the same chapter He says, "I am in my Father." And finally, at least for this particular list, Jesus says in chapter 15, "I am the vine. You are the branches."

Without a doubt, there are words of comfort in these different ways that Jesus describes Himself. As the "bread of life" Jesus is telling us that He is the provider of what we need for our lives, and as the "one from above" who was the "I am" before Abraham He is making it clear to us that He is the One true God. That fact can be a great comfort for us when we remember that it means that He truly can and will provide everything that we need.

As the second person of the Trinity who is the great "I am", He has all the power in the universe, and that includes the power of death and life. So when Jesus describes Himself as "the resurrection and the life" He is able to back up that claim because He is the Son of God, and the proof that He is "the resurrection" is why we are in the middle of this seven week celebration called Easter. What greater comfort do we hear from the mouth of our Lord than the fact that He is in control of death and is the source of life itself!?

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus describes Himself as "the Good Shepherd." This section of the Scriptures isn't a quote from Jesus that someone would typically turn to for comfort. Yes,

Psalm 23 talks about the Lord as our shepherd, but there's a difference between the psalmist comparing Him to a shepherd and Jesus actually calling Himself the Good Shepherd. Listen again to how Jesus describes Himself in John 10, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."

Jesus is not just any shepherd who provides for the flock in His care. He is the Good Shepherd who willingly lays down His life for the sheep of His flock. This is not some hired hand that will turn tail and run in the face of danger or that will sacrifice one or two sheep for the rest of the flock. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, sacrifices His life for the entire flock. He knows each and every one of them, and His sheep know Him. At least, His sheep are supposed to know Him and listen to His voice.

It's ironic, isn't it, that as Christians we have the care and protection of the Good Shepherd, but we are so far lost in our sins that we can't even be good and proper sheep? As His sheep, we're supposed to listen to His voice, and follow Him wherever He leads us. A few years ago, in some reading that I was doing, I learned something about how a shepherd did his work. I read that, "When the valleys grew dark on the evening journeys back to the sheep fold, the

shepherds would beat out a rhythm with their rod and staff. Even though the sheep could not see their shepherd, they knew he was there.”

The Good Shepherd knows how to care for and how to lead His sheep where we need to go, even in the darkest of nights. But with our sinful natures it seems that we do anything but listen to His voice or respond to His rod and staff. Sheep are supposed to listen to the will of their shepherd and to follow where they are led. But we are some pretty sad and rebellious sheep. We constantly try to get out of the range of the Good Shepherd’s voice so that we don’t need to listen to Him, or instead of following His voice we chase after another one that sounds better to us.

And it’s amazing the things that we are willing to listen too other than the Good Shepherd. The list could go on and on, but it would definitely include listening to false teachings that minimize the Lord’s perfect sacrifice for us by insisting that we must contribute to our own salvation by doing good works or making a sincere decision. It would also include attempts to convince us that the Lord’s gifts for us just aren’t enough, and that we must chase after worldly things to enhance our devotion and worship. Teachings like these sound good to the ears of us wayward sheep because these teachings ultimately put our efforts and our desires and our will ahead of our Good Shepherd’s. It doesn’t matter to sinful sheep how the Lord wants to provide His gifts to us. If His way doesn’t please us, then we’d rather make the decision of how it should be done or we just flat-out refuse the gifts. As the poor examples of sheep that we are, we try to take the place of the Good Shepherd in a spiritual version of the classic George Orwell novel, *Animal Farm*.

But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, does not abandon us, His sheep, even to our own worst enemies, ourselves. The Good Shepherd won’t turn away from His flock, even in the face of

mortal danger, even in the face of a torturous death; He will lay down His life for His sheep. His devotion and His love are unshakeable. And if He would go so far before His death, how much further will He go now that He sits in resurrection glory at the right hand of God the Father? He has the authority given to Him by the Father.

Yes, there is much comfort to be found in the fact that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who has laid down His life for His sheep. And not just for the sheep of the original flock of Israel, but also for the sheep of the whole world. No one is excluded from the protection and the sacrifice of the Good Shepherd unless they want to be. But as long as a person has life in this world, the love and mercy of the Good Shepherd and His Father can be received.

This life is full of struggles and pain and suffering. There is no denying that and there is no avoiding it. But when those things do strike you, there is great comfort to be found in the Word of God, especially in knowing who God is according to the way that He has described and revealed Himself in Jesus. He is everything that Jesus told us He is, and so much more than could ever be understood by our limited minds. He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep, who leads us beside still waters and through the valley of death with His rod and staff to bring us to His Father's home where we will dwell with Him forever. The Good Shepherd has promised it and guaranteed it with His own blood by willingly laying down His own life for us and taking it up again when He rose from the grave. He rose indeed! Alleluia! Amen.