

**"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to 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 authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."**

Theme: We can follow Jesus as our Good Shepherd

- I. Because he knows us
- II. Because we know his voice
- III. Because he laid down his life and took it up again

Who do you follow? In 2021, that's kind of a complicated question. We talk about "following" different sports teams. Maybe we keep up with what our favorite actors or musicians are up to. Most of us probably use some sort of social media where you can "follow" people you know and even people you don't. You can feel connected to just about anybody that you want to. I know it's just a word, and following someone on social media doesn't mean that they're our hero or that we want to be exactly like them. But I do think we're lying to ourselves if we say that that's never what it means. As much as we want to believe otherwise, we're followers. We all look up to people, we want to be like the people we admire, and whether we realize it or not, we tend to follow the examples of those people.

We follow people for a wide variety of reasons. The people we look up to the most have probably earned that respect from us in some way. Maybe it's a sibling or a parent, or your spouse or just a friend, and you trust them and their advice because they always seem to be there for you. But as we know so well, nobody's perfect. Every once in a while, they won't have the perfect advice. Or they won't make the time for you or they just won't quite understand. I think we all probably know what that can feel like. Where do we turn then? In those times when you feel like no one's on your side, remember that you have a Savior who is always there to hear what's weighing on your heart. When the other sheep are letting you down, don't forget you have a Shepherd.

Listen again to what Jesus tells us: "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." Just as Jesus knows the Father—just as one person of the Trinity knows another—in the same way that God knows himself, that's how well Jesus says he knows his people. That's how well Jesus knows you! At another time during his ministry, Jesus said that God knows how many hairs are on our heads. He says that God cares for even the tiniest, most insignificant sparrow—so how much more doesn't he care for you and me? Our Shepherd isn't someone who's only around when things are looking up and we feel like we don't have anything to fear. He stays with us through the most challenging times in our lives, too, telling us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Not only does Jesus say that he knows us, but he says we know him too! So how do you know Jesus? Could you pick him out of a crowd? Could you recognize his voice? Probably not—the Bible tells us that Jesus looked and sounded just like a normal person. But you do know Jesus' voice. Have you ever gotten a letter or a text or an email from someone, and even though their name was attached to it, you thought, "That really doesn't sound like them"? I think about that with Christmas cards a lot—you can usually tell who did all the writing, even if they write from the perspective of each member of the family. You can't hear their voice, and yet you know what that person sounds like—you know them so well that you can recognize when it's someone else speaking in their place. That's how we know Jesus, too. He's given us a book full of his words, and we know what those words mean for us. Jesus' words are *life* to us. And that's why we want to study them and imprint them on our hearts and minds. Lots of people will say that they teach what the Bible says, but they don't sound like Jesus. Jesus tells us exactly who he is—he's our Savior. He says, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life." So when people say anything different, we know they're not preaching the truth. We know our Shepherd, and we recognize his voice.

Try to imagine if you were there, hearing Jesus speak these words. You're a Jewish person living 2000 years ago. You know your Old Testament—you know that God has promised a Messiah, and you're wondering if the things people say about this Jesus can possibly be true. You know what King David famously wrote in Psalm 23; they're some of your favorite, most comforting verses in the Old Testament. "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." But now Jesus is calling himself the Good Shepherd—not *a* good shepherd, but the only Good Shepherd. And then you remember what God said through the prophet Ezekiel: "I

myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays." What would you have done if you had been there? Can Jesus really be that same Good Shepherd? Would you have followed Jesus?

Of course we all like to think that the answer would be yes. But think about the people who really were there. After our text ends, we hear that some of the people tried to stone Jesus because he claimed to be that same shepherd that King David talked about. What Jesus said was not lost on them—they understood exactly what he meant, they just didn't believe him. We know there were also people who did believe what he said. The disciples were there. They followed Jesus closer than anyone. And yet within a few months, Jesus would lead them into Jerusalem, and when the Jewish leaders came to arrest him, all the disciples deserted him. I think about all the times that I've deserted Jesus. All the times that I had the chance to show my faith and do the right thing and went with the crowd instead. We say we want to follow Jesus... until following the world starts to sound more appealing. We let our fear of being disliked get in the way of our desire to share our faith with others. When I think about it, I've deserted Jesus for much less than the disciples ever did. There's a line from one of our hymns that says, "The Shepherd dies for sheep that love to wander." When I remember my sins, I realize that's exactly what I am—not just a sheep, but a sheep that wanders away from my Shepherd.

That's why it's so incredible what Jesus says to us. He doesn't leave the sheep to wander off on our own where we're sure to die. Instead, he says, "I am the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep." What kind of shepherd does that? Isn't the Shepherd's life more valuable than the lives of a thousand, a million, a billion sheep? And yet God decided that it was worth the life of the Shepherd to save you.

It's amazing how many details Jesus gave about his death and resurrection before they happened. In our text for today, he says, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to 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 authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." There was never any doubt about Jesus' purpose here on earth. He came to live perfectly, and to give his life up willingly. Nobody made Jesus do what he did. We think back to all the things he went through during Holy Week—being betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends, being treated like a criminal, being tortured and dying the most shameful death imaginable. He didn't have to do any of it, but he willingly gave himself up for the sake of sinners like us.

But the story didn't end there. When Jesus went to the cross, he knew that it would look like the worst possible defeat. And he also knew that three days later he would prove it to be the world's greatest victory. Jesus had told his disciples what was going to happen. He had the authority to lay his life down. As the perfect Son of God, only his death could pay for our sin. But he also had the authority to take his life back up again, to rise from the grave to prove to the world that he is our Lord and our God. He did everything he promised he would do. And because Jesus keeps his promises, we know we are forgiven. He had the authority to be our Savior, and by his resurrection he showed that he had the authority over sin and death, too. Because Jesus lives, we know that we also will live.

Knowing that Jesus is risen is the most incredible message in the world. When they had seen their resurrected Lord, the disciples couldn't help speaking about the things they had seen and heard. Jesus had told them, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." There was a whole world that needed to hear the good news of Jesus, and the disciples were eager to do exactly that. We still have that same opportunity. The world still needs to hear about its Savior, and God uses us to bring his gospel to others. It's the priceless treasure that can be shared with every single person on this planet and never run out. We know who Jesus is and what he's done, and so we want everyone to come to know their Good Shepherd just as we have.

It's an interesting little scenario we like to talk about sometimes: if your house was burning down and you were getting out as fast as you possibly could, what would you grab on your way out?? I've thought about that before and, honestly, I don't know if I'd even think to grab anything. But if I saw it out of the corner of my eye, I wonder if I wouldn't take the extra step back to grab the little statue of Jesus that I've had as long as I can remember. But it's not just a statue of Jesus. He's also holding a little lamb, and he's got his arm around a little boy. When I was little, I always thought about that little boy as me. I could look at that little ceramic statue and it reminded me that Jesus loved me and he was always with me. It's just an artist's rendition of a man and a boy and a sheep, but the meaning behind it is exactly what Jesus says to us today. He is the one and only Good Shepherd, and he cares for us with a love that we can't even comprehend. Jesus doesn't show us he cares for us by simply putting his arm around us. He stretched his arms out on the cross, and he raised them up on Easter to say see my hands, see my feet. See what I've done for you. Jesus laid down his life for us, and he took it back up again to prove our victory is complete. The world is full of people and things that beg us to follow them. But we have the Good Shepherd. It's him we trust. It's him we follow. Amen.