

We get pretty possessive when it comes to the things that matter to us- we've seen this in other people and experienced it ourselves; the heart rate goes up and the face gets red as somebody looks someone square in the eye and says, "don't treat *my flag* that way." Or, someone's being obnoxious in public, you might finally say, "don't talk that way in front of *my kids*, or *my wife*." Heaven help the person who thinks they can come into *my house* with ill intentions. On a lighter note, I even get defensive about people trying to touch *my French Fries*. That's *mine*. And you don't get to mess with it. Now, it's easy for these protective instincts to go too far, to turn into greed or a matter of ego, but that's not always the case. In fact, we see Jesus passionately guarding, protecting, and standing up for what is his. Today, Jesus speaks about us- he refers to us as "*my sheep*," and illustrates for us how far the good shepherd is willing to go to guard and protect *his* sheep.

Sheep and shepherds were commonplace in Israelite culture, and this isn't the first time we hear about sheep in the bible...from the picture of the sacrificial lamb introduced during the Exodus, to the lowly shepherds who were out in the fields on the first Christmas. Whatever's happening, sheep are usually in the background. One reference the bible makes to sheep, we heard repeated during the season of Lent..."we all like sheep have gone astray." In John, Jesus shows us what a good shepherd does for his wandering sheep.

Because that's what sheep do- they wander. They go astray. It's not so much that they're stupid- it's that their sheep minds can't think about too many things at once. They know the shepherd is good, they know wolves and wild animals are bad, but when they're grazing, they don't notice anything except the grass in front of them. So, sheep can fall into the jaws of a predator for a reason as simple as, "there was green grass there." And the Shepherd rushes to fight back whatever animal it is, or maybe keeps one from wandering too close to a cliff, and breathless, tired, and sweating he brings the sheep safely back to the flock, and guess what. It's not long before that same sheep starts wandering again. This is where we see the patience of a shepherd- going back, over and over and over to fetch, save, even put his life on the line for the same sheep who are incapable of keeping themselves out of harm's way.

The shepherd doesn't give up, though, or wake up in the morning and decide, "these sheep should have learned by now, I'm not going to go after them today, I'll only watch out for the sheep that stay close to me." The true shepherd doesn't say that because he knows that's a death sentence for them...and those are *his* sheep. He won't let anything happen to *his* sheep.

The more we watch this scene play out of perpetually wandering sheep, the more we realize we're looking at our own hearts in a mirror. How many times have we come into God's house, and confessed how in the last week we wandered from God's path, God's will, God's law. We went astray- not because we hated God or because we wanted to leave him, but because our eyes and our hearts were focused elsewhere. One Sunday we're in church, praising our shepherd, and then there are six long days for those people who bother us and frustrate us to really get under our skin and we wander in thoughts of anger and hatred and unkind words pour out. We have a shepherd who takes care of us and provides for us, until we see what someone else has and suddenly contentment and satisfaction are set aside and jealousy and greed and selfishness take over. Every week, our hearts wander back down the same foolish paths, the same temptations and fixations. Every week, something other than our shepherd and his love forces its way to the front of our hearts.

But the Good Shepherd doesn't give up on us, either. In a situation where anyone else would say, "enough of this, no more, you're all horrible, it's over," Jesus says, "these are still my sheep." Despite our wandering, our straying, our ignorance...the enemy, the wolf, can't have us. *My* sheep.

When Jesus said we are his, it wasn't just empty words, and he proves it. Three times he spells it out, **The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, I lay down my life for the sheep, I lay down my life, only to take it up again.** It's one thing to spend long days and sleepless nights faithfully going after the wandering sheep...it's a completely different level of dedication and love for a shepherd to die for his sheep. A couple years ago I bought my first motorcycle. It was shiny. Red. I can't count the number of times I thought or said, man I love my bike. I all but swore I would never let anything come between me and it. It got a few dings and scratches, but I still loved it and wouldn't let it go. Then I moved to Utah, and knew I wouldn't see it for a year...and realized it would be to my advantage to have that money in my bank account instead of sitting in a garage in Wisconsin. And for the convenience of a fistful of cash, I

tearlessly traded way what I once said I would hang onto forever. I was young. I changed my mind. Because, when I said I loved it, it was just words.

Jesus didn't say, "I love you and I'll keep you," and then turn to the cross, see the misery and agony that awaited him there and say, "Well this changes things. I think I'm going to keep my life, instead. It would be to my advantage not to subject myself to the wickedness of my own, fallen, creation." He was in the position to say that- our sin and wandering gave him every right to leave us behind. Instead, he laid down his life. Betrayal, suffering, death, was the price he was willing to pay so that he can call us "my sheep." But even death couldn't hold him. I don't need to have been here to know that two weeks ago you celebrated in a loud and festive manner the fact that Christ has risen. Paul writes, because Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again: there is nothing that can separate us- this possession, this ownership, the love and patience that seeks out and guards us, is enduring. Even his death couldn't separate him from us, and our deaths will bring us so much closer to him.

When Jesus says, you're mine, he doesn't mean 'you're mine until you do something that makes me change my mind about you, you're mine as long as you live up to a certain standard, as long as you don't disgust me,' he means he died for you, he rose for you, and you are his forever. We are his, to rescue from the attacks of Satan. His, to call back when we wander again. and again. His, to lead to green pastures and quiet waters. It's a good thing to belong to the Good Shepherd.

What does it mean for us now, to be sheep in the good shepherd's flock? We know what the shepherd does, how he's brought us into his fold, how he's proved his love and devotion to us in the greatest way, but what about us, as sheep who are still susceptible to danger, and still prone to wandering? Do we have an obligation to live our lives cursing ourselves every day for not being better, for not being worthy of our good shepherd? No. Should we throw up our hands and say, let's wander then, since we got nothing to worry about? It doesn't mean that either. Here's what it means to be a sheep in the Good Shepherd's flock- to hear his voice.

As our Savior does this patient work of bringing us back to his fold, of delivering us from the devil and his schemes and traps, he trains us to listen to his voice. To distinguish it from all other voices. He speaks through the Word, and the more we hear it, the more we internalize it, the more the Holy Spirit does his work of increasing its hold on our hearts, the closer he draws us to himself. His voice echoes in our hearts and it's always there- when temptation arises, hear the voice saying, "in those thoughts, in those words in those actions, there is danger, and I don't want that for my sheep." Trust the voice of the shepherd. When we realize we've lost our focus on Christ and wandered again, hear his reminder, he hasn't left us- his love and forgiveness are as strong and free as ever. When the big and dark question marks in life spring up, hear the shepherd's voice reminding us: I know the plans I have for my sheep, good and gracious plans. Our shepherd never changes, but he changes us as he leads us with his voice. Let us know and trust the good shepherd's voice as our source of comfort and hope and instruction and forgiveness.

In almost all of the pictures I've seen that portray Jesus as the Good Shepherd, he's holding one. He's got one in his hands held against his chest, or maybe over his shoulders. That's Jesus' sheep. That lamb that Jesus keeps and carries so gently yet loves so fiercely is you, and it's me.