

Gethsemane Lutheran Church

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Lectionary Bible Study for Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:11-18

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10 NRSV)

When we are lonely, in trouble, or in pain, we can find comfort in the words of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” In our reading today in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus invokes these familiar words when he says “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11 NRSV).

In calling himself the shepherd, Jesus uses imagery that is familiar to the people of his time. In Palestine agrarian society, most of the people lived a subsistence lifestyle. Lambs, sheep, goats and kids were part of everyday life: moving regularly from fields to the pens, used for milk, and then for cheese, and then for meat. Shepherds were sometimes children. Days, even weeks, were spent sleeping out in the hills caring for animals. (Fun fact: these hills are where Jewish rebels had their base during the Maccabean revolt against the Empire in 168-4 BCE).

Jesus says he is a shepherd, one to whom the sheep belong, unlike the “thieves and bandits” who seek to do the sheep harm. This contrast recalls the words of the prophet Ezekiel, who used the same imagery to call out corrupt leaders in the southern kingdom of Judah in the 6th century, using “shepherd” as a reference to a king, priest, or person in authority. Ezekiel writes: “Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Woe, shepherds of Israel who have

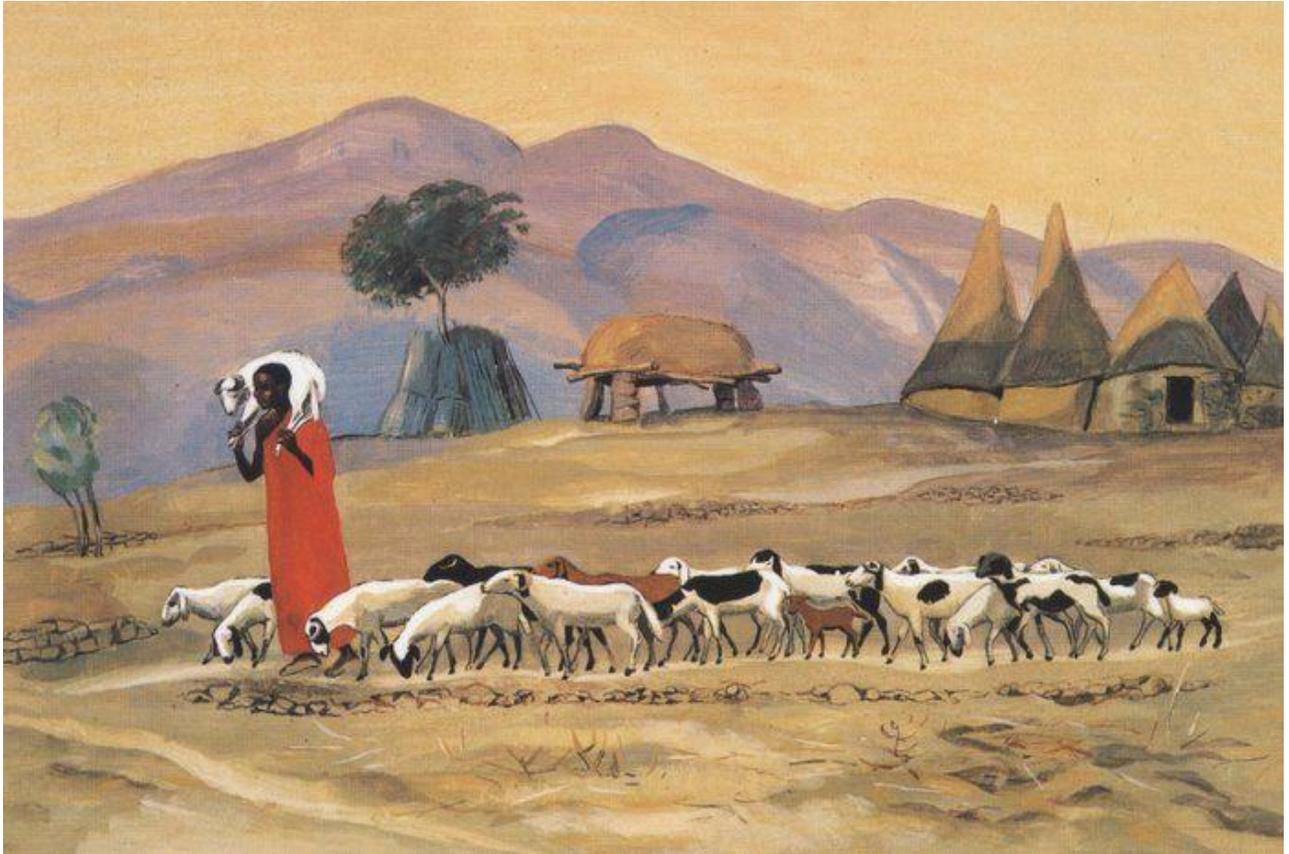
been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?" (Ezekiel 34:1-2).

During Ezekiel's time, the kings of Israel took advantage of the people and abandoned them. Although the Pharisees do not seem to recognize it, Jesus is saying the same thing about them. Under the rule of the Roman Empire, a select few Jewish religious leaders, priests and judges profited...while 99% of the Jewish people barely scraped by making a living. They may have had authority over them, but did the leaders really care for the people?

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God declares, "I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God" (Ezekiel 34:11, 15). How could Jesus say that he was the good shepherd? Is Jesus telling us that he is, in fact, God?

The image of shepherd that Jesus presents is an intimate, relational one: the shepherd cares deeply for the sheep in his care, protects them and knows them by name. Jesus says, "I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (John 10:14-15 NRSV). This "knowing" isn't only about being aware of one another but being in personal relationship and shared experience. It is the feeling that someone "knows what we are going through."

Jesus is telling the people of his time that not only does he know their struggle for survival, but he shares in it, and will feed them, protect them, and sustain them. Instead of just barely making a living, Jesus has come so that they will have "abundant life." Instead of being scattered and vulnerable to exploitation, Jesus will unite and lead them. The shepherd "gives his life" (the Greek here more closely means "risks his life") for the sheep. Jesus has the power to lay down his life in death, but also to take it up again in the resurrection, showing us God's power.



Jesus Mafa <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=48288>

The care, protection and presence of the Good Shepherd is still God's promise to us today.

Who do you know who needs to hear this message of hope? How is God calling you to be like Jesus...giving of your life to be in solidarity with others?

What is your relationship with Jesus today? Do you feel "known" by God? If not, ask for God to reveal Godself to you this week.

Holy One, you promise that we will have abundant life in you. Help me to know you more deeply. Show me the ways that I can bring your hope, comfort and peace to those in my family, my neighborhood, our community, and our world. Guide me as I seek to follow you where you lead. Amen.