

March 24, 2019

I Am

I Am the Good Shepherd

John 10:7-14

Opening words: The Gospel of John is preoccupied with the deity of Jesus. Chapter one sets the tone for the rest of the book. In that chapter, John declares Jesus, the Word, to be God, and goes on to say, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." He announces that in Jesus, the glory of God has been seen, and he further speaks of Jesus as the One who has made the invisible God known. And then, we have the multiple "I Am" sayings scattered throughout John's gospel. The title "I Am" is the divine name revealed to Moses by God in Exodus 3:14 from the burning bush. By taking on this name, Jesus claimed to be God! The "I Am" sayings not only speak of Jesus' identity, but each of the seven "I Am" sayings reveal an aspect of Jesus' mission.

During the season of Lent, I am looking at Jesus' "I Am" statements. Each one is rich in divine truth. I began this sermon series on Ash Wednesday. On that night, I looked at the original "I Am" saying in Exodus 3. Two weeks ago, we looked at Jesus's statement, "I am the bread of life." It is a statement about eternal satisfaction. Last week's I Am statement, "I am the light of the world," is a statement about eternal hope. Today's I Am statement, "I am the good shepherd," is a statement about eternal love.

Early in the 1960's, there was a radio show called *Conversation*. The concept was simple. A panel of experts in various fields was asked a single question to debate. They were to come up with a single answer. The question on one episode was, *What is your greatest fear?* After much heated debate, a single answer was given, nuclear annihilation. Everyone agreed, but one panelist remained silent. His name was Bennett Cerf. Do you remember Bennett Cerf? He was a Christian writer who was known for both his quick intellect and his humor. He sat quietly and never tried to persuade the others. Later, the master of ceremonies inquired about his non-participation. Cerf said, "My answer to the question, *what is your greatest fear*, seemed silly next to the rest." He finished by saying, "My greatest fear is not being loved." Can you imagine not being loved? It may be your greatest fear, but it will never happen. Never forget it. The God of the universe loves you! Our Gospel reading for this morning is John 10:7-14. Let me call this message *I Am the Good Shepherd*.

John 10:7-14 Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. ¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own 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.¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me."

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) was a British writer and lay theologian. He held academic positions in English literature at both Oxford University and Cambridge University. He once said, "*Though our feelings come and go, God's love for us does not.*" If you are thankful that God loves you, say, "**Amen!**" That takes us to this morning's Gospel lesson.

We find ourselves in the tenth chapter of John. The author is not specific about the crowd. Jesus' words were meant for the general public. Jesus addresses a topic that is familiar to the crowd, a sheep pen. At that time, it was a court surrounded by steep walls open to the sky. The only easy way into the pen, or out of the pen, was through a common gate. Only thieves would attempt to enter through the steep walls. Inside of the pen, the sheep found security and rest. Their predators were outside of the pen. Outside of the pen, they experienced the pastures and enjoyment. Generally, the sheep lived their lives running in and out of the pen. The only way in, and out, of the pen was through the gate. Rob Fuquay in his book, *The God We Can Know: Exploring the "I Am" Sayings of Jesus*, says we are much like the sheep. We spend our lives running from the familiar and comfortable to the unknown and the exciting. I think he is right. Have you ever sat at home dreaming of your next vacation, only to miss home after a few days away on vacation? This is the key line:

The only one who controlled the gate of the sheep pen was the shepherd. He protected the sheep inside of the pen and watched them outside of the pen. Do you see the connection between this Gospel reading and our lives? Jesus creates two "I Am" sayings from this one tranquil scene. Jesus said at one point, "I am the gate". Later, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd." Good shepherds cared about their sheep, because they loved their sheep. Unlike the hired hand who ran away when danger came, the good shepherd was not afraid to lay down his life. What is Jesus trying to say? Jesus is saying, he loves us. He was not afraid to lay down his life for us sheep. If you are thankful God loves you, say, "**Amen!**" Can I state the obvious?

Love is a complex topic. In the English language we have one word for love: love! I have mentioned this in the past. We use the same word, love, to express our feelings for a variety of things and relationships. We love America. We love pizza. We love warm weather. We love our favorite song. We love our mothers. The English language is sloppy when it comes to the word love. In other languages, there is more than one word to explain different kinds of love.

When I was in school, I studied Biblical Greek. In Biblical Greek there are three words for love. The first word is the word EROS, which gives us the word "erotic". It is sensual love. It is the kind of love that involves a box of candy, a fistful of flowers, and boxer

shorts. The second word is the word PHILIA, which gives us the word "philanthropist" (lover of people). It is a social love. For example, Andrew Carnegie was a philanthropist. He wanted to improve communities, so he gave a fortune to establish libraries in both the United States and Canada. The third word is AGAPE. That is the word that is used in the New Testament for God's sacrificial love, which we see in Jesus. That is the kind of love Jesus expresses when he says he is the good shepherd. It is this Greek word for love that John uses in John 3:16, *for God so loved the world*.

James W. Moore (born 1938) is a retired United Methodist pastor. He served in the state of Texas for many years. Many of his sermons have been published. I find some value in them. In one of his sermons, he talks of love. He said John 3:16 holds the key to our understanding of God's sacrificial love. He may be right. Jesus is the good shepherd, who was willing to lay down his life for his sheep (John 10:11). If you are ready to break that one verse down to explore God's love, say, "**Amen!**" Never forget it. Jesus is the good shepherd!

John 3:16 tells us, **God's love is wide!** John 3:16 begins: *For God so loved the world*. In other words, it talks about the width of God's love. Just think about that phrase for a moment. God loves the world! God's love is not selective. God loves everyone. He loves all nations. He loves people regardless of their language. He loves all denominations. He loves people, regardless of their salvation systems. He loves the attractive and the not so attractive. He loves the rich and the poor. God loves everyone! How do I know this divine truth? Because, John 3:16 begins, *"For God so loved the world."* That means God even loves you! If you are thankful God's love is wide, say, "**Amen!**" Jesus is the good shepherd!

John 3:16 tells us, **God's love is deep!** John 3:16 continues, *...he gave his one and only son*. In other words, it talks about the depth of God's love. God loves us, but he didn't show up with a fistful of flowers and a box of candy, wearing boxer shorts. He wasn't interested in a one-night stand. God demonstrated his love for us by entering this world to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins. That is what makes Good Friday so bad for Jesus, but so good for us. Jesus, the incarnation of God, died on the cross to atone for your sins. That is a heavy thought. Jesus' death made eternal life possible for you and me! Never question the depth of God's love. If you are thankful God's love is deep, say, "**Amen!**" Jesus is the good shepherd!

John 3:16 tells us, **God's love is powerful!** John 3:16 ends, *...that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life*. Does anyone here want to go to heaven? If you do, then there is only one option. You must accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You must believe in Jesus, and your hope of salvation will become a reality. It is the greatest gift you will ever receive. It is too good to be true, but it is true. You can live the rest of your life not worrying about death. It is so liberating. However, it will change you. You will spend the rest of your life trying to find a way to thank God for saving your sin-sick soul. The love of God is powerful. If you know Jesus as your Lord and

Savior, say, "**Amen!**" Jesus is the good shepherd!

In the book, *Becoming a Whole Person in a Broken World*, Ron Lee Davis tells the story of Marie. She was a little girl who had a horrible life. Marie was raised in an abusive home. When she was twelve years old, her parents were drunk, and they began to fight. They began to struggle over a gun. The gun went off, and Marie saw her father shot to death. In every way, Marie shattered, and ended up in a European mental hospital. She lived in a padded cell and acted out in violent ways. The doctors decided to treat her by using something called *catharsis*. In other words, they were going to let her vent her rage on someone. The nurse who volunteered to be the victim was a woman by the name of Hulda. Daily, Hulda walked into Marie's padded cell and was attacked. Marie would kick her. Marie would scream at her. Marie would hit her. Marie spit on her, and Marie scratched her. The scene was ugly. However, after an hour, Marie was exhausted and would sit in the corner of her cell and cry. It was at that moment Hulda completed the treatment. She would go over to Marie and hold her. She would whisper in her ears those little life changing words, "I love you." Little by little, the message got through. In time, Marie got better. She became a whole person. It may be Marie's story, but it is the story of all mankind. Like Marie, we need to be reminded we are loved.

Jesus suffered and died so we could live. Isaiah 53:5 says, "*He (Jesus) was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*" How can you question God's love for you? Jesus truly was the good shepherd. C. S. Lewis once said, "*Though our feelings come and go, God's love for us does not.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Jesus is the good shepherd!