

Shepherding Job Description

In the gospel of John, there is more discourse than is present in the other gospels. Jesus does a lot of talking. Instead of the emphasis being on the miracles—the powers of healing, of feeding thousands with almost nothing, the ability to walk on water, etc. to indicate his identity as the promised Messiah, John records what are called signs and they are prefaced by “I am” statements made by Jesus. Some of these signs include something miraculous—like the turning of water into wine, but their importance is determined by that opening phrase. For those who heard this phrase it would immediately recall the interaction of Moses with Yahweh at the burning bush. When Moses asked the voice to identify itself beyond as the God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac he wanted was asking for the Lord’s name. God’s response as recorded in our translations was “I am who I am. The Hebrew word used is complex. It is more a description than a proper name as it is a 1st person verb which has multiple tenses embedded in the form. A more exact translation is “I am who I am and I am who I will be.” So when Jesus begins a teaching with this phrase “I am” the claim of messiahship, of divinity is inherent to his audience. This is an identity statement which connects to the divine they have always known. This morning our passage begins “I am the Good Shepherd”. This passage follows another text where Jesus connects who he is and what he has come to do with the traditional image which relates God’s relationship to Israel’s people as one of shepherding. In it he speaks of being the gate which protects the gathered fold and also the gatekeeper. There was an agricultural society, so they knew well what shepherds did. The psalm chosen for today’s reading is a testimony to this long held image of God as the shepherd of Israel: The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. Within the writings of the prophets this image of shepherding appears again and again. Jesus knew his audience would make the connections to these pronouncements from God as well. Within Ezekiel 34, the prophet’s message from God is two-fold. He first addresses the “false shepherds” of Israel. Those who do not feed the sheep, who do not clothe them, who do not strengthen the weak, who do not heal the sick, bind the wounds of the injured or bring back the strayed. This job description of the shepherd’s job is given through the failures seen in Israel’s way of living. The false shepherds God is calling out are the religious and political leaders of Israel. These charges are based on their failure to live into the commandments given in the covenant which are summarized in Deuteronomy: Love the Lord with all you are and love your neighbor as yourself. Because of these failures God then proclaims: “Therefore you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord,...because my sheep have become prey...since there is no shepherd and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep but fed themselves....I will rescue my sheep. Ezekiel 34: 15-16 reads this way: “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.” In this passage from John’s gospel, Jesus is proclaiming this same message—he has come to be the shepherd and he will gather and protect the claimed children of God. Ezekiel 34: 23: “I will set up over them one shepherd...and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” So there is a long and rich tradition associated with this image of God as shepherd among the disciples. All those who heard Jesus speak these words

understand what Jesus is claiming about himself. But in the presence of all these connections, Jesus adds a new element. Jesus opens with “I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” There are no qualifiers or no equivocation. Jesus states clearly what he has come to do—he has come to rescue his sheep. The good shepherd described in Ezekiel searches for the sheep, rescues them, gathers them, feeds them, binds up their wounds and strengthens the weak ones. Jesus has come to fulfill that description of gathering and rescue. Yet this image which characterizes the shepherd as one who will sacrifice himself to the point of death is not found in the tradition conveyed by the Hebrew Scripture. Near the end of today’s passage, Jesus affirms that being the Good Shepherd will cost him his life—“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.” As our Good Shepherd Jesus tells those listening to him that he will voluntarily do this in obedience to the Father’s command. This image of the good shepherd tending to the flock which is so valued and valuable that the shepherd will stop at nothing to keep them gathered and safe gives us a deep sense of peace and contentment. This text does contain other messages when examined in light of the tradition. Like in the Ezekiel text, Jesus describes the behavior of some who have the task of shepherding, but are not really fulfilling the job. Jesus describes them as the hired hands that run away when danger approaches the flock leaving them to be snatched and scattered. “The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.” This is the opposite behavior from the Good Shepherd for the Good Shepherd knows and is known by the sheep of his flock. He cares for them because he loves them. What is often overlooked in this passage which we hold so dear because of these comforting assurances in it for us is what is found in verse 16 which reads: I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” We have a tendency to think in terms that make that one flock the one to which we belong. Part of the Hebrew tradition speaks in many places of God’s bringing back the scattered sheep. Here in this passage as well as in the Hebrew scripture it is declared that God knows all the sheep and that they will be gathered because they will know his voice and that he is God. Yet when Jesus spoke these words, the audience understood them in terms of the long held special relationship between God and the people of Israel. What are the implications of this idea of more than one flock to be gathered? It implies that there will be more gathered into the fold than those whose ancestors had formed the peoples of Israel. God was not done gathering and neither is Jesus. Despite his healings, despite his preaching, despite all that he had already done and planned to do...Jesus isn’t done yet. He still has more sheep to reach, sheep that are not in this fold. By extension, we can know that God isn’t done yet either. And this is important for three reasons. First, God has continued to call people from all walks of life, from every nation on the face of the earth, and from each and every generation across about two thousand years since Jesus first spoke these words until this very day. If that were not true, we would not have come to the faith found in the gospel texts. God is still seeking and gathering sheep. Secondly, we know that God is at work in our midst and through us and our witness to extend the invitation to abundant life offered by the Good Shepherd. When I think of what Jesus said to the disciples

during the post resurrection time, I can't help but think of how consistently his message was that as he had been sent, so those who followed him were being sent. In John's gospel when Peter and the others left Jerusalem to return to Galilee and spent the night fishing unsuccessfully, as dawn came they saw Jesus on the shoreline waiting for them. During their conversation Jesus asked Peter three times—Do you love me? Each time Peter responded in the affirmative. After he did so, Jesus gave him a task—Feed my sheep. Throughout the narratives of Jesus' life and teachings there is a consistent theme that those who follow him are being given a task—they are being commissioned in the words of Matthew, they are being sent according to all the gospel accounts. Their purpose as those who have received and know God's grace is to spread the good news of God's love which is offered so abundantly, so generously that the divine came to live among us and rescue us offering his life to redeem us. There is nothing in the narrative which defines the sheep except that they are known and loved. God's sheep are not those who are worthy, they are only those who are loved. Jesus told Peter—and tells us—that intrinsically bound up in that witness is the demonstration of love for the other as we love others as we are loved. 1st John 3: 17-18-- "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action." The call to be a witness to Jesus' abiding love which dwells within his disciples is also a call to not only gather but to tend—to care for—to protect. The good news is that we are loved unconditionally. The good news is that God loves us all unconditionally. Thanks be to God.