

**Jesus Is the Good Shepherd: Jesus Cares – John 10:11-15**

This week at Vacation Bible School we learned how Jesus gathers us together as a shepherd gathers his sheep in a flock. It was only fitting, then, that our first Bible lesson taught us that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who cares for every member of his flock from the oldest sheep to the youngest lamb.

Now when sheep get scared, they need someone to assure them that they are safe. They need to know that someone will protect them and provide what they need. They need to know that because sheep are defenseless animals who don't always pay attention to what's going on around them. In a similar way when children get scared, they need someone to care for and help them, protect and assure them. Thankfully the Lord provides people like that—parents, grandparents, pastors, teachers, friends, neighbors, but you don't have to be a sheep to need a shepherd who cares for you and assures you when you are afraid.

Even the toughest adult has to admit that there are times when uncertainty, confusion, worry, or stress can lead to fear and anxiety. Maybe you feel like your life is spiraling out of control or you feel like a juggler with too many plates in the air ready to come crashing down at any moment. Maybe you feel like you're circling around in a holding pattern wondering what's going to happen next in your life or in the life of a loved one. Maybe worry about the future leaves you feeling frozen in place. Maybe guilt caused by another fall into a sin of weakness leaves you feeling like you're caught in a pit with no way out, but then the Good Shepherd comes along and picks you up with his nail-scarred hands to hold you close to his heart.

You hear his assuring voice and that voice brings peace to your heart and comfort to your soul. That's the voice of Jesus, your Good Shepherd who cared so much for you that he laid down his life to save you. Jesus provides you with protection and deliverance when you are helpless or in trouble. He takes your fear away, because Jesus, your Good Shepherd, cares for you today and will for all eternity.

*Hear now a reading from John 10.*

**Jesus Feeds 5,000 People: Jesus Provides – Mark 6:30-44**

On our second day of Vacation Bible School we traveled out to a lonely spot along the shores of the Sea of Galilee where we found the Good Shepherd miraculously providing for his flock.

There is something inside every one of us that needs to know our needs are being provided. You want to know that your next meal is coming and where it's coming from. You want to know that there will be a warm bed and a roof over your head when you go to sleep. You want to know that there will be money to pay the bills. You want to know that the medical care you need is available. Unfortunately that need to know that your needs are provided can very easily lead to worry that they won't. You can end up focusing all your energy and effort, your time and priorities, even life itself on meeting not just your basic needs, but trying to get to that point in life when you think you won't have to worry about your needs anymore. Sadly when you devote everything to reaching that point in life, you end up being no different than a sheep so focused on the next tuft of juicy grass that it wanders farther and farther away from the flock and the shepherd who cares for it.

...But consider what Jesus accomplished with just five little loaves of bread and two dried fish! You see, it all started with Jesus' compassion for a large crowd that seemed ***“like a sheep without a shepherd.”*** He was exhausted from a busy day of teaching and healing many. He wanted to take a break away from the crowd with his disciples, but the crowd followed him out to that lonely spot along the Sea of Galilee. It was getting late and there was no money to buy dinner for everybody, but the Good Shepherd in compassionate love took it upon himself to provide for his flock. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up to heaven, gave thanks, and divided up the bread and fish feeding everyone who was there. We're told there were at least 5,000 men, not counting women and children, but more remarkable is the fact that Jesus didn't just provide for his flock with basic rations. No, he provided them with so much food that they had 12 baskets full of leftovers.

If Jesus can do that with so little, surely he can provide for all your needs no matter how small or big. Most importantly, however, Jesus provides for your spiritual needs—forgiveness of sins, new life in him now, and eternal life with him in the glories of heaven someday. Amazingly Jesus, our Good Shepherd, provides all that we need for our bodies and souls both now and forever! ***Hear now a reading from Mark 6.***

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### **Jesus Tells About a Sower: Jesus Leads – Matthew 13:1-9,16-23**

On days three and four we heard a couple stories that Jesus told to teach heavenly truths. First Jesus told about a farmer scattering seeds over the ground. As farmers go, the one in Jesus' story is probably far more generous than most farmers. Some would say wasteful. He tosses that seed everywhere rather than individually planting each seed. When he does that some seed falls on the hard path. Some falls on rocky soil. Some falls among thorny weeds, and some of it falls on good soil. The seed that falls on the path is quickly picked up by the birds. The seed that falls on the rocky soil grows up quickly, but has shallow roots so it wilts in the hot sun. The seed that falls among the weeds is soon choked out by those weeds, but the seed that falls on the good soil bears a rich and fruitful crop.

So what's Jesus' point? Why tell a story about a farmer who didn't seem to pay much attention to where he was planting his seed? Jesus explains that the seed is the Word of God and that he sends that Word out through us to the people and world around us. We don't always know what the soil is like. We don't know if or when our sharing of the good news of Jesus will take root and bear fruit in the hearts of our hearers, but we do trust that God has promised, ***“My word...goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”*** (Isaiah 55:11) Some will reject it. Some will be happy to hear it at first, but fall away later. Some won't have the time for it, but many others will receive that good news of Jesus with joy as happened in our own hearts.

With unconditional love, God worked through his Word in our hearts. He planted faith there and opened our ears to hear the good news of the Savior who lived and died and rose for us. Now he leads us in paths of righteousness through that precious Word. So let's take that good news of Jesus that changed our lives and scatter that seed of God's love trusting that he will provide the harvest.

*Hear now a reading from Matthew 13.*

### **Jesus Tells About a Lost Son: Jesus Forgives – Luke 15:20-24**

On Day 4, we heard Jesus tell a story about a family—a father with two adult sons. The father is generous in every way, but his younger son basically tells him to drop dead and give him his half of the inheritance. With tears of loving concern in his eyes, the father hands over the inheritance and the son takes off for a distant country. He blows all the money on wild living and just as he runs out of money a severe famine hits the region. So he's penniless, hungry, alone, and the only job he can find is feeding pigs—a repulsive job for any self-respecting Jew, but he's so hungry that he wants to eat the pig food. Yuck!

Jesus tells us that the young man eventually comes to his senses and heads home hoping to become a servant in his father's house. You can imagine the young man working over his canned confession while on the journey, but even while he's a ways off, the young man suddenly hears his father yelling with joy and sees him running full speed out to meet him. His father practically bowls the young man over with a hug and a kiss and commands his servants to cover his son's shame with a fine robe and his wayward feet with sandals. Then on top of all that, he throws a party too! But the drama doesn't end there. The young man's older brother finds out that dad is throwing a party for his foolish brother, so he jealously refuses to come in from the fields. Amazingly his gracious father leaves the party to bring him in too so they all can celebrate this new life.

This story is often described as “The Parable of the Prodigal or Lost Son,” but perhaps it would be better titled, “The Parable of the Forgiving Father.” Every one of us has been either like that wayward, wandering son foolishly fulfilling the desires of our sinful natures or like the jealous, self-righteous son who looked down at his brother in hypocritical judgment. Every one of us has been like either brother or even both at some point in our lives, but that only illustrates our desperate need for a “forgiving father,” who loves us unconditionally and is constantly concerned for our souls. Thankfully, you and I have just such a “forgiving father.”

God, our Father, rejoiced when he found you, when he rescued you, when he covered your sin and shame with the holy blood of Jesus, when he raised you to life and opened the gates of heaven to you. You didn't go and find him. He found you. You don't earn his favor. He loves you unconditionally. No matter your background, no matter what you've done or failed to do in your past, no matter what, you have a “forgiving father,” who loves you and finds you like a shepherd seeking a lost lamb. He gathers you into his family and gives you eternal life—free of charge—both now and forever.

*Hear now a reading from Luke 15.*

## Jesus Appears to Mary in the Garden: Jesus Is Our Savior – John 20:11-18

On our final day of Vacation Bible School, we found Jesus standing outside his empty tomb and talking to his dear friend Mary Magdalene. In this final lesson, we see Jesus do something very fitting for one who is our Good Shepherd and we see Mary respond as a true sheep in the Lord's flock. Mary was distraught with grief over why the tomb is empty, even after seeing two angels in white sitting in the tomb. So Jesus comes to comfort her, but she thinks he's just the gardener tending the cemetery. Maybe he hid the body and she can go get it for proper burial. Yet when the Good Shepherd calls his lamb by name, she immediately recognizes his voice—**"Rabboni"**, which means "Teacher!" By faith in his Word, Mary recognized her Lord Jesus, her Good Shepherd and living Savior, but then Jesus sent her out to share that good news. **"I have seen the Lord,"** she tells Jesus' disciples so they would know that he is their living Savior too.

You and I have so many reasons to be like Mary—distraught, grieving, worried, confused, fearful. On our own, we would remain in our sins loaded down with guilt and the fear of death. We are as defenseless as sheep against our sinful natures, death, and Satan, but remember what Jesus said, **"I know my sheep, and my sheep know me."** (John 10:11-14) Jesus knows your name. Jesus knows who you are and what you're going through, where you've been and where you're headed. He knows your likes and dislikes, your experiences and your gifts, but above all, he knows that he is your Savior. So he calls you by name to be his own. He defends and protects you, even giving up his life for you, but then takes that life back up again so you would live forever. He cares and provides for you. He leads and forgives you. Why? Because Jesus is your Savior both now and forever!

So what will you do with the good news that Jesus is your Savior? We tell others what we have seen and heard. We tell others of the Good Shepherd and serve as his voice calling to other wandering sheep like us. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is our Savior from sin and death and the devil both now and forever! Amen.

*Hear now a reading from John 20.*