



YEAR 1—The God of Life: A Story of God's Redeeming Shalom

Module 4—Coming Alive by Being Human: Jesus Stories on What it Means to Be Human and Fully Alive

Lesson 1—John 10:1-21

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

(A theological and biblical reflection on today's Scripture passage.)

GOD'S STORY

Jesus was a master story-teller, using evocative metaphors and images to describe the purpose of why he came, and how we are called into the fullness of life in him. This passage is one of his more well-known metaphors, where he describes himself as the Good Shepherd, and his followers as sheep who intimately know his voice and follow him alone. The passage seems so straight forward, but when we begin to peel back the layers of it, its depth is uncovered. As God's story this passage may in fact confound our very ideas about God and what it means for him to bring us into the fullness of life through Jesus Christ.

The most striking moment in this story comes toward the end, when Jesus tells his listeners that just as sheep know the voice of their shepherd, so he knows the Father, God. Jesus is essentially saying that what he is on earth to do is to gather a community of followers from among the people of the world, and in so doing he is fulfilling the will of God the Father. Jesus' mission, in other words, is God's mission of life for the world. When the followers of Jesus, his sheep, learn the voice of Jesus and begin to follow him they are joining in the work of God the Father in the world. To know Jesus is to know God. To be in on God's mission of life for the world is to discover the fullness of life in following Jesus through discipleship. This is why Jesus is the Good Shepherd, because he is the fulfillment of God's promise to restore life to the world. Being a follower of Jesus is the way to the fullness of life God has always intended for us. Jesus therefore is the harbinger of life for the world—the kind of life that far surpasses our wildest dreams (10:10).

Interestingly enough, as Jesus talks about leading us into life beyond what we may have imagined, he also mentions the kind of sacrificial love at the heart of this way of life. Jesus tells his listeners that he will not hesitate to sacrifice his own life for the sake of his followers, clearly foreshadowing the cross. God's way of life is sacrificial and the goodness of Jesus as the one who leads us into life consists in his willingness to suffer and die in our place. At the core of God's mission is this kind of sacrificial love embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. The fullness of love that God intends for us to experience in Jesus Christ is demonstrated in the love of Jesus who willingly gives himself away in order that we might live. This is the shepherd whom followers of Jesus are called to emulate in discipleship.

OUR STORY

This story indicates that for us to discover the fullness of life with God we must become followers of Jesus. We are called to become Jesus' disciples, as those engaged in life his way. Through discipleship to Jesus we come to discover our true humanity, which is what it means for us to live into the abundance of life that Jesus talks about in this passage. This is God's gift of grace to us in Jesus Christ, and it is good news for us. We are invited to live our lives in such a way that we become who God has always intended us to be, full of life in the act of corresponding to Jesus. This is how Jesus invites us to share in life with God and truly live. Yet, grasping this reality may challenge how we have thought about discipleship in the past.

The goodness of God in this passage is Jesus' willingness to lay down his life for his followers. Simply put, God's goodness for us is dying for us. As followers of Jesus we are likewise invited to find our life through sacrificing for the sake of others. This sacrificial understanding of discipleship challenges an easy notion of what it means to become fully alive by following Jesus. Our life does not get easier as it begins to correspond more and more to Jesus' own sacrificial way of life. In this correspondence we learn to distinguish the voice of Jesus from all the shepherds that seek our demise, and in this there is great security. But we also realize that the voice of Jesus may be leading us into pastures that seem dangerous, perhaps even deadly. The security of following Jesus is not that he leads us away from danger, but that we are following him into the way of life even if it means sacrificing ourselves for the sake of others. As we learn to follow Jesus this kind of sacrificial love becomes part of our very being, and in living life for the sake of others we discover the fullness of life with Jesus.

Discipleship understood in this way challenges any comfortable notions we may have had about the good life. Jesus doesn't call us to be more successful in our jobs. Jesus doesn't call us to become prestigious or noteworthy. We aren't called to follow Jesus because it will always make our lives easier. Rather, Jesus is inviting us to discover the fullness of life by simply and intentionally loving and serving others who cannot give us anything in return. Isn't this precisely what Jesus has done for us? Because of his death in our place, what could we possibly give him in return but to follow him with our lives? This is our story not simply because in it we see ourselves as the sheep following the Good Shepherd, Jesus. It is our story because it teaches us what it means to be the sheep who know the voice of the shepherd, and so respond by patterning our lives on Jesus' sacrificial love for the world.

OTHERS' STORY

Shepherds have a unique vantage point as leaders of their flock. They can see the entire flock, knowing all of the sheep that are supposed to be following them. As Jesus looks over his followers, he knows who they are. This passage tells us that as his followers we are to simply listen for his voice and follow. Yet many of us—myself, included—think that once we begin to follow Jesus we somehow gain the kind of vantage point Jesus has. We begin to determine for ourselves who is in and who is out, drawing boundaries that allow us to determine who is appropriately a sheep, and who is not. Yet Jesus says this, "You need to know that I have other sheep in addition to those in this pen" (John 10:16, *The Message*). Apparently we aren't the only ones God has called into life with Jesus Christ.

Of course we know this, yet this seems to be one of our most pervasive temptations as we enter the way of life with Jesus. Our boundary-making attitude leads us away from others, the very people to whom we are sent to practice Jesus' way of sacrificial love. Rather than seeing ourselves as one flock, who all are responding to the voice of Jesus calling us further into the world to display his sacrificial love for all, we see multiple flocks. Relationships under the leadership of Jesus meant to restore life and wholeness become petty and divisive as we force others to make a choice, not to follow Jesus but to pick a side. We need to really listen for the voice of Jesus in others.

God's mission in Jesus is so much larger than our tiny pocket of experience with it. Part of the discovery of the fullness of life which Jesus leads us into is the surprising ways in which he is at work, beckoning us to follow him more closely, through the sheep from another pen. The church that is called into God's mission in Jesus Christ through discipleship needs to become a place where, despite our differences, we can begin to realize that the Shepherd who has called us to life and fellowship with him is the same one whose voice is calling others.

THE WORLD'S STORY

As we think about all the images Jesus uses to unpack his mission to bring his followers back into the fullness of life with God, we may miss one that is crucially important. Jesus suggests that not only is he the shepherd, but he is also the gate through which the sheep go out into the pasture from their pens. God in Jesus Christ is not gathering us for the safety of remaining cooped up in some pen. As followers of Jesus we are being ushered out into the world to discover the fullness of life with Jesus there, as well as to bear witness to the world of the fullness of life that is Jesus Christ.

God does not want his people cooped up away from the pastures of life. God in Jesus Christ draws us out of a huddled existence and into the world to be a part of his mission in which life is being restored to the world. The church, that community of Jesus followers brought together to serve others in the way of Jesus through sacrificial love, is to exist out among the world as a witness to God's way of life. They are to be a blessing community for the world, intent to share the fullness of life that they experience in Jesus Christ. Of course the world in which sin is still present can be a dangerous place for followers of Jesus who are intent on living sacrificially for the sake of others. Yet this is where security is found because this is where Jesus is found. We are called to exist for the sake of the world, knowing that even if the world comes against us, we are cared for by the one in whom death and destruction have been overcome, the one who is our shepherd, Jesus Christ.

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