

Know Your Shepherd's Voice
May 11th, 2014

John 10:1-10
Easter 4 A – Good Shepherd Sunday

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This may seem a painfully obvious and leading question on Good Shepherd Sunday, but I'm going to ask it all the same: what is a sheep without a shepherd? Now, a few of you may have been raised on farms that had livestock, but I would expect that most of us here have a basic understanding of sheep anyway. We know that sheep are basically defenseless and not terribly clever. You may know that they have a very strong herding instinct and have a very strong urge then to follow where everyone else is going without knowing or caring if the leader has any idea where he is going. They also have a tendency to run uphill when in danger, though I'm not sure if that's relevant.

So what is a sheep without a shepherd? And here, we're asking that question in the context of what Jesus is saying in our Gospel today, so we're talking domesticated sheep, not wild ones. And that means a sheep with no shepherd is not in good shape. They are essentially helpless, they are directionless and they are not likely to have a long and happy life. Whether by natural danger or predator or thief, their quiet life is likely to end very quickly. Without protection and direction, they are constantly in grave danger.

Do I even have to connect the dots for you? Spiritually speaking, we are no better off than sheep. Now, unlike sheep, we get a false sense of security from the world we can see around us. We're born into it, we grow, we learn and we gain experience. We become competent at taking care of ourselves and handling difficult situations that arise and we like to think that we're pretty well-prepared to handle whatever happens to us in our lives. But that's an illusion. We can't see the real dangers on our own and when they come, we are utterly helpless against them.

And what is this danger we don't see? It ourselves. You were born into this world a selfish, prideful, arrogant sinner whose only love is for yourself. Anything nice you did for others along the way was done because it also benefitted you in some way, even if it was just feeling better about yourself. And God? The God who gave you life, who gave you your smarts and your skill and the strength of your hands? The God who provided you food and shelter? God who only asked to be given credit where credit was due in your life. He was not even acknowledged. Now, he has a very simple law set up in our world. And the kind of behavior each of us exhibits by nature, you included, is deserving of punishment.

For every violation of holiness, for every ugly act of selfishness, there must be an equally unholy torment extracted from you. Except, you can never pay enough to make up for your crimes on your own, so when the judgment is passed and the torment begins...it won't ever end. It's already too late to do "better", just because you can see the danger doesn't mean you can do anything about it. Like a sheep before a predator, there's nothing you can do.

We need someone who knows better than us. We need someone stronger than us. We need a shepherd who will guide us in the right ways. Who will keep us safe at night and lead us to a place where we can be safe and saved. But then the question becomes...who? Now, I know you already know the answer to that question, but consider for a moment how we know who the right shepherd is. So many voices call out in our world that we should follow them and them alone. And despite what some people might like to think, they are not all different strains of the same voice. There are so many religious groups that claim to know the only way and they are fundamentally incompatible with each other. There is no way that all roads lead to the same heaven so how can we know which voice is really the shepherd who will save us?

It is the shepherd himself who teaches us the truth about himself. Note carefully the double analogy Jesus uses in our gospel today and how the two parts fit together. <Read text: John 10:1-10>.

Jesus gives us very specific criteria as to how we can identify the shepherd of the sheep. Quite simply, only the shepherd enters by the gate. In terms of his metaphor, that makes perfect sense. He's the only one who has the right to enter the sheep pen, and so he's the only one that the guard will allow in by way of the gate. Anyone else who wants in is going to have to climb over the fence somewhere else, but it won't be by way of the gate. And anyone else who wants in is a thief and a robber (v1). They come only to kill and destroy, not to help (v10).

So the shepherd we need to follow uses the gate. How does that knowledge help us as we look out over the world? As simple sheep, how do we identify which of these people promising salvation came in by the gate and which climbed the fence? We know which is which because Jesus tells us about the gate. He is the gate. The man who enters by the gate is our shepherd. Now, you can get a sense of what Jesus means there but this truth is further illuminated by other sections of scripture and made quite clear. Especially what Jesus said to his disciples just before he died when he told them, **"I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me."** (Jn 14:6).

The gate is Jesus. He is the only way to eternal life and salvation. Anyone who approaches us in any way other than salvation by Jesus' work alone is not the shepherd. And in the strictest sense, Jesus himself is the shepherd. He comes

to us offering himself alone as our salvation from our crimes. He made the payment on the cross. What would have taken an eternity of suffering from us, he paid for in the hours he hung there and suffered. As God made man, his sacrifice was worth more than any one human life, it was worth them all. His resurrection shows that the penalty for death was fully paid and that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. This is the truth he comes to us with. Through the gate of himself he comes to tell us that he made full payment on our behalf. That in him we are made innocent before the Father and our crimes are no longer counted against us. Only in him is this possible. Only by him can we be saved (v9). We can recognize our Good Shepherd because he comes to us by the only way that will save us: his death on our behalf.

Of course, Jesus himself does not literally stand in a pulpit on Sunday and call to us, so we must apply this same criteria to those who speak on his behalf. And this is perhaps the more important point. It's easy to say that Jesus is the way of salvation and he is our Shepherd that we should follow alone. But how do we know which of those claiming to be his shepherds on earth are the ones really calling with his voice? Well, like I said, we use the same criteria. Did they enter by the gate...or climb the fence somewhere else? Paul himself lays this out for us and puts the burden even on himself when he writes, **"But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!"** (Gal 1:8).

Pretty straightforward. We identify his earthly shepherds because they use the same gate to reach the flock that Jesus himself did. They shepherd us with the message of Christ alone. In him and only in him, through no effort of our own are we saved. Anyone who speaks a message other than that is a robber and thief, whose only goal is our destruction.

And yet despite how straightforward this *should* be, and how obvious it is to you and me as we sit here, there is still very real danger for us if we are not vigilant. Why do I say that? Because of what we see around us constantly. In our weekly study of other religious groups recently, some of the most common-heard expressions were ones like, "How could they think that is true?" "How could they believe such a thing?" and of course, "How terrible it must be to think like that." It's astonishing that people are led so far astray by false shepherds, and it's terrifying to see what they trust in and what that can do to their lives. And yet, the majority of these groups, whether it's the huge mega-churches that water the gospel down to nothing, or the craziness of the Mormons or the fearful life of the Jehovah's Witness, the majority of these groups are not finding most of their converts in the complete atheist or agnostic. They're mainstream Christians who are being led astray. They are the people who should know the voice of their shepherd but don't. They have been led away by thieves and robbers.

These groups should be so easily identified by Jesus' sheep. They do not enter by the gate. They preach other ways to heaven than by Christ's work alone. Whether it's coming up with a whole new crazy system like the Mormons or whether it's just adding in a bit of something you have to do to cooperate with Christ like many Reformed churches, they do not enter by the gate. And when they speak, it is not with the shepherd's voice. Jesus speaks to us by the scriptures alone, but these thieves either add their own voice to his or they discredit his voice bit by bit, saying we can't fully trust what's written in our Bibles for one reason or another.

But these thieves do not come in the open. They come at night and with subtlety. They try to lead us away by masking their voice to sound like our Good Shepherd's. They don't start off with the things we'd object to, they come sounding like they have the same or even better truth. Only if you know the Shepherd's voice and know it well are you going to recognize them when they call to you. Only then are you going to know that it's not your Shepherd calling.

And how do we learn to tell two things apart when they seem so similar at first glance? Well you have to study one or both carefully so you know them well! And that is one of the reasons our God urges us to hear his voice at every opportunity. He gives us the opportunities in our worship life, in our Bible Studies and the very fact that you have a Bible at home. He urges us to listen to him there so we know what his voice sounds like better than any other and so we'll recognize the thieves when they come without fail.

Of course, the most important reason to listen to the voice of our Shepherd is to hear not the quality of his voice but to hear the content of what he has to say. A message of sin forgiven, fully and freely. Of a home prepared for us beyond this life. Of a God who watches over you even now, guarding and protecting, guiding and providing so that we might travel that safe path to life everlasting. Listen to the call of your Shepherd. Recognize him by the gate he uses and listen to his voice so that you can always recognize him and him alone as our true Good Shepherd. Amen.