

Text: John 10:11-18 (Easter 4)
Date: Sunday, May 7, 2006
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Grace and Peace be unto you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

In this day and age, calling someone a “sheep” isn’t considered a nice thing to do. The term “sheep”, as it refers to people, is a derogatory term that suggests someone has no capacity for independent thought. Suggesting that sheep blindly follow others.

Well, guess what? According to Christ, we are sheep. But why?

First off, sheep all look pretty much the same- maybe not to other sheep- but to us they do. This isn’t to imply that each sheep is an identical twin to another, but if you are driving by a pasture in your car, it is pretty hard to tell one sheep from another.

Secondly, as I have come to understand it, sheep (like many animals who often serve as prey) have an acute sense of hearing. They can hear faint sounds and distinguish voices. It is said, that when a shepherd calls his sheep they respond. If another voice calls, they are not so likely to respond.

Considering all of this, imagine with me a hillside where a few flocks of sheep are grazing together. Of course these flocks will intermingle as they feed. And soon on the hillside there will be one undistinguishable woolly mess. Now, when the time comes to move on, the shepherds call out to their sheep. The flocks separate and each sheep will follow its own shepherd. This is the sort of imagery that our Lord is calling to mind in today’s gospel lesson.

Jesus compares people to sheep. For one thing, you can’t tell who they belong to just by looking at them. If you watch a camera panning a crowd at the Super bowl, you cannot pick out who is a Christian and who is not. Christians do not have some sort of visible mark on their foreheads or a glowing halo that declares their faith. They are not extra fit or extra healthy. They look pretty much like everybody else, no matter whom they follow.

So, what’s the difference? What sets our Lord’s people apart from the rest of the sheep? His sheep hear His voice; and because they hear His voice, they know Him and follow Him.

The sheep hear the Shepherd’s voice, and so they know Him and follow Him; and this is the substance of what the Shepherd calls out:

“I am the Good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep. I have laid down my life for you at the cross, and I have taken it up again. I am risen and I am alive, and I continue to shepherd you. I lead you to the still waters of the font, so that you might be dead to sin and raised to life everlasting, clothed in a robe of righteousness as pure-white as snowy wool.”

This is the voice of the Shepherd, reverberating through the centuries. Sheep hear His voice; they believe Him, and they follow Him. That’s why they are His sheep. They don’t look any different for it, nor are they confined to the fold of one nation or people: The Shepherd calls out to all nations, gathering His sheep from many folds, that all who hear and believe might be saved.

All of this is what makes Him the Good Shepherd. He has laid down His life for the sheep. He has taken it up again to shepherd them unto life everlasting. And so He shepherds His sheep today with His voice. Like a shepherd’s crook designed to repel attacks and rescue the endangered, His voice declares a twofold message: Law to expose sin and warn of the attacks of the wolves, and Gospel to rescue His sheep from the jaws of sin, death and the devil-by the forgiveness of sins.

This Gospel lesson portrays the life of the Christian: Christians are sheep. In saying that, remember the points of comparison: This does not mean that, as sheep, you are less than smart or live only to be fleeced. Rather, it means that you have heard the Shepherd’s voice and believed in Him, and so you follow Him. It also means that you are fed by the Good Shepherd, who forgives and strengthens you by His means of grace. It also means that you are threatened by the wolves that prowl and seek to devour you.

Christ warns us of the dangers that surround us and threaten our faith in this world. We are told to be cautious of “hired

hands" that will pretend to care for us, but in the end will abandon us during times of strife and suffering. Who are these "hired hands" that Christ warns us about? We don't know for sure. They may come in the form of preachers, teachers, or even pastors.

One can tell a false shepherd by examining any would-be shepherd with this question: Does the shepherd repeat the Word of the Good Shepherd? It is only that Word that warns the sheep of danger and strengthens their faith. If it is another word, it does not save. It does not feed the sheep. It may be a popular food, spoken with great enthusiasm and excitement; it may be a pleasurable food, one that gets the sheep salivating. However, such foods are the spiritual equivalent of potato chips and pork rinds: Your senses might prefer them over peas and broccoli, but they do nothing for your health. This is the case with the hireling: You might find the message of a hireling far more attractive and pleasurable than the Word of the Lord; but it does nothing to feed your soul. And if your soul is not fed, it is dying or dead.

False shepherds come in more than one form. Many follow the lure of money, succumbing to a creed of greed; others submit to the seduction of sensual pleasure, believing that whatever is enjoyable must be right. Still others are drawn by the siren-song of fairness and equality, believing that getting one's self-declared rights respected is what life is all about. Personal success is another attractive faith, for who does not want to feel triumphant over others?

Hired hands or false shepherds appear to be numerous. You can easily find preachers who will encourage you to be saved by the power of positive thinking, who will tell you that religion is all about self-help, creating better relationships or holistic healing. You can easily find preachers who will tell you that salvation is all about living a good-enough life and doing enough good works to make God happy with you. You can easily find preachers who tell you that they proclaim Jesus Christ, and Jesus just doesn't care about all sorts of sins like he used to. You can easily find preachers who will tell you that all religions worship the same God; some will tell you that they still need Jesus, some will not. Many will tell you to put your trust in human rules and interpretations over and above the truth of God's Word. All sorts of preachers will tell you that religion is really about social justice, psychological principles, financial success, physical health, tolerance and catering to unbelievers.

In our pluralistic world that teaches everyone is right, it is unpopular to warn against other voices and condemn their teachings. However, if we are to be faithful, we must do so. With all of these clamorous messages, we once again apply the same question to measure for hirelings: When the wolf of death comes prowling, does this voice save you? Do any of these messages raise you from the dead? If you dedicate your life to tolerance, self-help or financial success, will any of these help you escape the grave? Will all of your good works return breath to your lungs? Have Buddha, Vishnu, Mohammed, Venus or Bacchus died to redeem you from sin? Do manmade rules, opinions and bylaws absolve you of your sin? Have you died to redeem you from sin?

No, and this is why they are hirelings: They might spill out an attractive message, but they abandon you to the jaws of death.

We preach the Law to warn you of false shepherds and wolves; and in exposing the danger of false shepherds and predators, we prepare you for this saving message of Gospel: There is a Good Shepherd, who saves you. Hear Him declare His mission to you once again: "The Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep....Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I might take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again."

That is the purpose of your Savior's incarnation, life, cross, death and resurrection: Your salvation. No other shepherd lays down his life and has the power to take it up again. Jesus does, and has. Your Good Shepherd was crucified for your sin and rose again on the third day. He lives and reigns and speaks His Word to you in His means of grace. Not just for this life. No, He speaks His Word to you so that He will raise you up again to everlasting life.

We are the sheep of the good shepherd! Thanks be to God!