

In the Care of the Good Shepherd

John 10:22-30

Fifth Sunday of Easter, (May 22) 2011

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Last Sunday is known in the church as “Shepherd Sunday,” and since I was sick last week I wanted to stick with the Shepherd readings this Sunday. All our texts, particularly our gospel for today, as well as the psalm speak of God and Jesus as shepherd and of us as the sheep. These Scriptures on Shepherd Sunday are particularly important to Austin Heights. Our church logo, our “brand,” is a shepherd’s staff. For many years, central to our identity and self-understanding is that we are in the care of the Good Shepherd. These words in John 10, the 23rd Psalm, and the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15 all shape who we are and how we see and serve the world.

At the same time, I realize that I have to be careful here: some of you have actually been around sheep and you may not take kindly to being called “sheep.” Sheep get sheared or slaughtered and are notoriously dumb. So you might not like it when I, or Jesus, refer to you as sheep, members of this ragtag flock we call the church.

But sheep require a shepherd. That may mean, not that they are dumb, but rather they are smart enough to know they can’t go it alone, they need someone to lead and to guide them. In fact, the more I read, it’s cattle ranchers who spread rumors about sheep, and all because sheep do not behave like cows. We all know that you herd cows and drive cows from the rear by hooting and whistling cowboys, but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud

noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led. You push cows but you lead sheep, and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first - namely their shepherd - who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right.

Sounds pretty smart to me. And sounds like something all of us could learn.

A couple of years ago, when I was in the Holy Land, one of the most inspiring things I saw was the very common sight of flocks of sheep with their shepherds. It amazed me that I was witnessing a scene that Jesus almost certainly witnessed two thousand years ago; Palestinian shepherds bringing their flocks home from the various pastures they have grazed during the day. Barbara Brown Taylor says that often those flocks will end up at the same watering hole around dusk, so that they get all mixed up together - eight or nine small flocks turning into a convention of thirsty sheep. Their shepherds do not worry about the mix-up, however. When it is time to go home, each one issues his or her own distinctive call - a special trill or whistle, or a particular tune on a particular reed pipe, and that shepherd's sheep withdraw from the crowd to follow their shepherd home. They know whom they belong to; they know their shepherd's voice, and it is the only one they will follow (from Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Voice of the Shepherd.").

Today's Scripture has a number of critics confronting Jesus, attempting to entrap him. Jesus has proclaimed to them who he is - at least, he does so in the Gospel of John - and he has tried to tell and to show them what he is about. But they just don't get it. Some have believed, some have witnessed his work and heard his words and have said, "Here is the long-awaited Christ!" But others have looked at Jesus and have found in him a charlatan or a madman, a blasphemmer or an impostor.

Why are some able to believe and some not?

I do not know. Maybe even Jesus doesn't know. He doesn't get into a great deal of speculation on the difficulties of belief, or the causes of disbelief. Here, in today's gospel, Jesus says simply that he is the shepherd and that his sheep hear his voice and know him. They believe because they are his sheep. They are his sheep because they believe. Sounds like circular logic, doesn't it?

“My sheep know who I am and believe and if they don't, they're not my sheep because they don't know who I am and believe.”

Ah, that's the hard part, isn't it? Believe. We've been for some time in the season of Easter. For many people, for many of us, Easter presents one of the greatest challenges to belief - all this talk of resurrection, and life from death. Some of you, at the end of a particularly glorious Easter service, with trumpets, and lilies, and the choir, and the sermon, the Hallelujah Chorus, and the crowds, emerged muttering to yourself, “I just don't know. I just can't be certain.”

Maybe you're the sort who can stand and say and sing with a sure voice, “I believe in the resurrection and the life.” Or, “I know my redeemer liveth.”

Maybe you have never been bedeviled by doubts. Fine. Belief comes easily for you. But we ought to note that, even with Jesus standing right in front of him, listening firsthand to his words and witnessing his mighty works, many did not believe. So if you sit there today struggling to believe, this Scripture ought to remind you it has been that way since the very first.

Jesus says to his critics, “You do not believe simply because you are not my sheep. My sheep know me, know my voice, and believe. You're not in my sheepfold, so of course, you don't believe.”

Note carefully: Jesus doesn't say that you are admitted into the flock if you believe or that you are kicked out of the flock if you don't believe. No, he says that, if you're in the flock, you're one of his. You hear his voice, and know him and he knows you and won't let you go.

Aren't you in the flock? I'm looking at a bunch of sheep right now who look like they're in the flock. There you sit, you sheep. Jesus says that's good enough for him. You are in the flock so you hear his voice and he knows you and that's what it takes. He doesn't raise the bar that you've got to get over if you are to make the grade as one of his disciples. In fact, your making the grade, getting up over the bar, doesn't seem to be the point at all of being one of his disciples. Rather, it's a simple matter of just hearing his voice and coming forward to follow, of being in the fold.

When I was a kid, I sometimes wondered what would happen if someone came forward at the end of a worship service and said, "You know, all that stuff we say we believe? Things like the resurrection of Jesus, the Bible, Jesus walking on water, and turning water into wine, prayer, and the presence of the Holy Spirit ... well, I don't believe that stuff anymore." I wondered what would happen.

I wondered what would happen if during a hymn, someone waved their arms and shouted, "Hold on, hold on! I don't believe any of this in verse two. Most of verse one I believe, but not verse two." I wondered if our pastor might say, "Get out; you can't be here unless you believe, and you need to believe just like it says."

But Jesus doesn't say anything like that here. He just says his sheep hear his voice and he knows them and they know him. They're in the fold just on the basis of hearing his voice.

That's just about all of us, no matter our doubts, questions, or reservations we may harbor about all of our Christian beliefs. We sit in the fold. You may not have your head straight on every part of the Bible. You may not know what to think about the Doctrine of the Trinity. Easter? You thought you were fairly sure on that a few Sundays ago, but today, in the clear light of May, you're not so sure.

Belief, for most of us, is a come-and-go kind of thing. In church, we feel assurance and conviction rise within us. But then we wander out of here, into the world, away from the fold, and it is more difficult. There are other voices that compete for our attention. The paths go in myriad directions. What once seemed so sure and certain for us begins to fade.

But none of that may be the point. You or your belief or you and your doubts may not be the point. The point is, you're here. You have heard the voice of Jesus and you have come forth, you have come into the fold. Somehow you have heard something that sounded in some way like the voice of God, the voice of the Good Shepherd, inviting you to come forth and be part of this gathering, this flock. And that's enough, says Jesus, for him to keep you, to keep you for good. **It's not a matter of what you can say, but a matter of what he says.** It's his voice that keeps drawing us here. And it is here, in this flock with its shepherd's staff sign, that you find life, and hope, and grace, and the love of God.

Two days from now, twenty-one years ago, our oldest girl, Emily, was born. In the delivery room, Jane had just had a c-section, and the obstetrician had just handed the brand-new born Emily off to Dr. Bob. Bob was checking her over and of course, Emily was screaming her head off. Jane turned toward her and said, "Hey, darling; it's alright." Immediately, Emily stopped crying and turned her head and looked right at Jane. And Jane said, "That was it."

Emily knew the voice. We're here because we know the voice. There is much we don't know or we're not sure about. But somehow or another, in one way or another, in large ways or in a still small voice, it might be a whistle or cluck, like those shepherds in the Holy Land, but we know it when we hear it. Somehow we've heard something of God.

I've studied lots of theology – historical theology, systematic theology, Baptist theology, Catholic theology, Orthodox theology, and on and on. I've spent a lifetime pouring over the Scriptures. I read church history, Christian ethics, philosophy, and more. But when it comes to how I stand before Christ, I'm just like you. We are here because we have heard his voice and have come forward. Here we are, in the flock.

Furthermore, and this is important – the comfort is that he says he won't let his sheep go. He will keep us. Believe that if you can't believe anything else. At Easter, just as Jesus came back to his disheartened, half-believing, mostly unbelieving disciples, broke down the doors behind which they cowered, breathed upon them and blessed them, offering them "Peace," so he comes back to us. He keeps coming back to us. Easter is the first and last great promise that he will not let us go. **Our relationship with the shepherd is based upon who the shepherd is rather than who we are.** Today's gospel promises that he will keep his sheep in the fold. Nobody and nothing will snatch his sheep out of his hand. Never.

Can you live with that? I can live with that.

Amen and amen.