

## **Sermon – Listen for the voice of your Shepherd.**

One of the most comforting and memorable images portrayed throughout the Old and New Testament Scriptures is the picture of the loving and protecting Shepherd and his faithful, following flock. The beautiful words that we shared in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm today, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...”

And in our Gospel reading today, John, the Evangelist, records the words of Jesus, about himself, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” and again, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me... and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Jesus was predicting that the time would come when he would take our place; give himself up; and die sacrificially for the forgiveness of our sins and the sins of all time, of all people.

In many Christian denominations, this Sunday is referred to as “Good Shepherd Sunday”, along with Christian Family Sunday.

It always falls on the fourth Sunday of Easter, and the gospel text always comes from the tenth chapter of John.

But each segment of that chapter offers a different perspective on Christ as our good shepherd. The first ten verses describe Jesus as the Gate through which his sheep pass safely. The next section describes how the good shepherd is willing to lay down his own life for the sheep. In today’s passage, we learn how the shepherd’s voice identifies which sheep belong to the shepherd.

As John sets the scene for this conversation, we might wonder why he thinks it is important to tell us that it was winter. How does that detail fit into the larger story?

It’s possible that John wants to help us understand which festival he means – the festival of dedication that happened in the wintertime was what we now know as Hanukkah. It celebrated the rededication of the temple.

It's also possible that John is explaining why Jesus is walking in Solomon's portico. This particular porch had been part of the original temple, and rather than tear it down, Herod had incorporated it into his second Temple construction project. It was an area of the temple grounds that was enclosed and protected from the weather.

It could be that there is no significance at all – telling us that it is winter might just be John's way of helping us get our bearings, or letting us know that this conversation does not happen at the same time as the shepherd-related passages that come before it.

The crowds gather around Jesus as he walks in Solomon's porch. "Stop talking in riddles and parables," they complain. "If you are Messiah, just tell us!"

It's a challenge of authenticity, a call to defend his identity. Tell us plainly.

Haven't there been times when you prayed that prayer? Just tell me plainly what I need to know, Jesus. Show me clearly who you are, and the way I should go. Help me make the right decision. Make your will for me crystal clear. Give me a sign. Tell me plainly, so there is no misunderstanding. Keep it simple, so I get it.

Yet hasn't Jesus already told them? Many times. But it wasn't news they could accept.

It isn't that Jesus needs to improve his communications skills. He's been speaking clearly since the beginning. The problem is that the message he's preaching isn't what the people want to hear. They are looking for a particular kind of Messiah, someone who fits neatly in their idea of what a Messiah looks like, how a Messiah behaves. They are looking for someone to save them while they sit passively by and watch.

But Jesus is calling his followers into something completely different, something more. Jesus is calling his followers into a life-changing, intimate relationship. It's a call to action.

Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

Here's the real problem: those crowds demanding clear communication can't hear the shepherd's voice, because they aren't the shepherd's sheep. So where does that leave *us*? If we claim to follow Jesus, shouldn't we be able to hear our shepherd's voice?

Every day, we are constantly bombarded with voices that are NOT the shepherd's voice. Every day the news is filled with tragedy, and it seems every news story tries to tap into our deepest fears.

Every day, social media is filled with status updates that make us feel our lives aren't beautiful or perfect enough, happy enough, good enough. Our phones are set to notify us of every opinion posted, every comment made, every change in the weather.

There are voices everywhere, calling us to anger, hatred, greed, and worry. How can we possibly hear the voice of Jesus calling to us in the midst of all that noise?

It comes down to a question of identity. The crowds want Jesus to prove he is who he says he is. They want some form of authentication. Instead of showing them his credentials, Jesus turns the question around. His identity as the Son of God isn't the issue. Authenticating our identity as his faithful followers is the real question.

"My sheep know my voice, I know my sheep and they follow me, and I give them eternal life." It isn't Jesus' identity that's in question here. It's ours.

So, unless you are listening for his voice, you won't be able to follow Jesus. And unless you are following him, you can't call yourself one of his sheep.

Back at the beginning of the story, when Jesus was calling his first disciples, he said, “Follow me.” At the end of the story, after the resurrection, as Jesus feeds his disciples a breakfast of fish and bread on a rocky beach, he says the same thing: “Follow me.” Throughout the gospel, the message is always the same – Jesus calls, and those who hear him follow.

When we hear him and follow him, Jesus claims us as his own. We belong. This is good news. Because, if we belong to Jesus, it means we belong to God. Jesus says, “The Father and I are one.”

Now, this is more than the crowds badgering Jesus for his credentials had bargained for. And this plain answer raises an even bigger question. Is he telling the truth, or is he the biggest blasphemer there ever was? Because claiming identity with God is a dangerous thing to do. It’s what the pagan emperors did.

Remember that Jesus is walking in Solomon’s portico during the festival of Hanukkah – that celebration of the rededication of the temple following its defilement.

And the Roman empire was famous for claiming that Caesar was a god. That’s why it was so scandalous for Jesus to say, “give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” So, if Jesus is claiming to be one with the Father, how is that different from all those pagan emperors who claimed to be divine?

If you read a little further in John 10, you will find the crowds asking this same question, and becoming angry enough to pick up stones to throw at Jesus. And Jesus will tell them, “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and believe that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”

Christ's identity is clearly demonstrated in what he does. He is doing the work of the Father. That's his job. Our identity as his sheep is just as clearly demonstrated in what we do. Our job is to follow him. And the only way we can follow him is to listen for his voice, and go where he calls us to go.

So, what does following Jesus look like? How can our identity as Christ-followers be made crystal clear, not only to us, but to those who aren't yet part of the sheepfold?

Jesus will soon tell his disciples, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." In other words, "Do what I do." The way we act tells the world who Jesus is. The things we do tell the world who Jesus is. What we say tells the world who Jesus is. And what we do and say also tells the world who we are, and whose voice we obey.

Sometimes, I think we only listen to our own voices.

When we hear him and follow him, Jesus claims us as his own. And he does more than call to us. He does more than know us by name. He gives us eternal life, and promises that no one can snatch us out of his hand.

This is the ultimate promise. Once we belong to Christ, we are his forever. Jesus offers this promise to you today. Jesus is saying to you now, "You hear my voice. I know you, and you follow me. I give you eternal life, and you will never perish. No one will snatch you out of my hand." Amen