

First Trinity Lutheran Church
April 29, 2012
Text: John 10: 11-18
Good Shepherd Sunday

Following The Shepherd's Voice

The book of Psalms, contains 150 psalms but if I asked you to name a psalm, I am sure that just about everyone would say the same one. We would name the 23rd psalm. The one that says, "The Lord is my shepherd." There is something about that image of the shepherd that just captures our imagination.

In the history of the Christian church, we have drawn on that image of shepherd. For example, the word "pastor" comes from the Greek word that means "shepherd." A pastor is supposed to be a shepherd for the people of the church. Maybe you've seen a Roman Catholic bishop processing down the aisle at the start of a worship service. He has a shepherd's staff in his hand, a tall rod with a curved hook on top. That is a symbol of the bishop's office, because the bishop acts as the shepherd of the synod or diocese.

Today in the Gospel of John we encounter the image of shepherd. And in this metaphor Jesus represents the good shepherd. What is described here is a sheepfold. Back in the time of Jesus, the shepherds did not have a barn that they brought the sheep to at night. Instead, at the end of the day, shepherds would gather their sheep into these sheepfolds that were out in the fields. A sheepfold was a very simple enclosure that was made by stacking rocks up and forming a kind of pen where the sheep could be gathered together for the night. To make sure that no one got in to harm the sheep, it was very common for the shepherd to sleep at the entryway to the sheepfold. So in this passage, when we find Jesus being described as the Good Shepherd and as the gate to the sheepfold. These two descriptions of Jesus really go hand-in-hand.

But on any given hillside, it was likely that more than one shepherd had his sheep grazing there. So at the end of the day, it was common for two or more shepherds to put their sheep into

the same sheepfold for the night. But how would they know in the morning which sheep belonged to which shepherd. The shepherds had a very simple solution. You see, the shepherds lived with their sheep day and night. It was common for the shepherds to give their sheep names and to talk to them during the day, much like many people talk to their pets today. So after a while, the sheep would get used to the sound of their shepherd's voice. In the morning, the one shepherd would just have to stand outside the sheepfold and call out to his sheep, and the ones that belonged to him would respond to his voice and come.

Today the metaphor about sheep is difficult for us because many of us have never had much contact with sheep or for that matter contact with farm animals at all. But we are told by those who know that sheep easily follow. So in this story Jesus warns us that there will be other voices that will call out to us. He describes these voices as belonging to thieves and to bandits, people who are only out to do us harm. Jesus warns us to be careful, to listen closely to see if it is his voice that we hear or if it is the voice of another.

Christians of the former communist Russia may better be able to understand this analogy. After the communists were overthrown, some church leaders from the United States visited the Russian Christian churches. The Russians described how they were always on guard, knowing that a KGB agent might be present during any church function. The Americans were curious how the Russian Christians could go on never knowing who was there to spy on them. "Oh, we always knew who the KGB agents were. Sure, they would say the prayers and sing the hymns, just like all the rest of us. But it was something in their voice that gave them away, something about their voice that let us know that they weren't genuine."

As Jesus said, we need to be on guard against those other voices that call out to us. By that, he means for us to be on guard against those who do not have our best interests in mind. We need to be on the lookout for those who seem to be offering us a lot, but who in reality are only looking out for themselves.

Today there are so many other voices telling us what we should do, how we should look, how much money we should have, even how we should think. Just about everyone out there is willing to give us advice. But Jesus tells us that if we want the truth, if we want to know the way that is going to lead to real happiness, then we have to stop listening to all those other voices, and spend our time listening to Jesus instead.

But it seems like so often we hesitate to respond to Jesus' voice. We see him standing at the gate of the sheepfold, encouraging us to come out and follow him. But we look at each other instead, and decide that maybe things are good enough inside the sheepfold. And so we stay right where we are. Right inside our own little world.

In some states legislators are thinking about the idea of passing a new state law. The law would require churches to pay property taxes. The only exception would be churches that could prove that they are performing a significant service to the public. But isn't that what churches are supposed to be about? To feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless, to care for the poor? To offer hope where there is no hope. I wonder if that law were to eventually pass, how many churches will fail that test? And what does that have to say about what has become of the Christian church here in America?

When we were in Henryville IN the pastor Cheek of the Henryville Community Church told us that his church didn't want to get involved with the community. About two years before the storm they started a feeding program serving dinner each night for those in need and the church also started a food pantry but many in his church were not in favor. It was interesting that after the tornado destroyed most of the homes in Henryville his church was only suffered only minor damage. So it was only natural for the pastor to offer his church to become ground zero for the disaster recovery efforts. Now the church has a mission and a vision of what needs to be done and what can be done in the community.

Sure, we know that Jesus wants us to do all those things. To feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless, to care for the poor. But when Jesus comes along and says, "Who will come and do this?" we sort of figure there's a lot of other churches around, why can't they do that stuff. Do you hear the voice of Jesus? He is calling you. He calls many people and he calls each one of us by name. There are many voices in this world that are trying to get our attention. But it is only by following the voice of Jesus that we come to know what it means to live as we were meant to live.

In our text, Jesus says he is "The Good Shepherd." The primary characteristic of the good shepherd is the willingness to lay down his life for his sheep. The good shepherd has the power to lay down his life. The good shepherd will protect us against the wolves. He will even give his life to save us!

Because of his love for us, the good shepherd also has a vision for our future. The vision is to be "one" flock. There are sheep who do not belong to His fold yet, but the Good Shepherd desires to bring all sheep together. The unity is not with us as people but with the singleness of the shepherd. As we focus on Christ, our unity is discovered.

This is the good news of the gospel. In the midst of our broken world, we hear the voice of our good shepherd calling. The good shepherd calls us together. The good shepherd knows us. The good shepherd will protect us, The Good Shepherd has even freely given his very own life so that we might have life and have it abundantly.

Amen