

## GOOD SHEPHERDS? BAD SHEPHERDS?

JOHN 10:1-18

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10 *“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

7 *So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

11 *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”*

Today’s gospel lies within a long section of John that contains a series of controversies that Jesus has with various opponents. These controversies take place in chapters 5 through 10. The controversy within our text today is said to have occurred in Jerusalem, within the temple precinct, during the Feast of Dedication. This is the festival we know as Hanukkah. Hanukkah celebrates the great victory of the Maccabees over the Syrians in 160 CE. The Gospel writer John often places Jesus within the context of some Jewish festival. One of the reasons for this is that John wants to portray Jesus as supplanting or as taking precedence over these traditional celebrations. In verse 24 of John 10 following what we have read this morning Jesus is pressed to state clearly that he is indeed the Christ, the Messiah, the one promised to the chosen so many years earlier.

Jesus refuses a direct answer knowing that they would not believe him even if he said he was the Messiah. You see, they have all of the things that he did which would show he was the Messiah as a witness to his identity, but they remain unmoved. Even if he says he is the Messiah, they have their traditional messianic expectations and are unlikely to see the one standing before them as the Christ. Their idea of a Messiah was altogether different than what they saw in the Christ. This idea had been forged over many years of trying to survive as the people of God in hostile territory. They thought that when the Messiah came surely he would set all things right in their world. They would be on top of the heap and all the world that had mistreated them in the past would be put under them.

So, in the debate about whether he is the Messiah or not Jesus begins to use images that would be a lot easier to understand if you lived in the rural climate of Jesus’ day than the one we live in today. Jesus states that his sheep will hear and will recognize him as shepherd. *“You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep, (or my fold of sheep.)”* (v. 26).

We seem to be witnessing, not just a debate about why some believe in Jesus and some do not, but also some sort of investigation of the mystery of divine grace. Not only do the sheep, once given by God to the Son, know their true shepherd, but they persevere, the good shepherd will keep them safe.

My main point this morning is that we follow the shepherd whose voice we know. My question for us to consider is this: Whose voice, or whose voices, are we following in our life today?

Think with me about that for a few moments.

Sheep require a shepherd. That may mean, not that they are dumb, but rather they are smart enough to know they cannot go it alone—they need someone to lead and to guide them. Don't we all?

Or maybe we prefer to be cows instead of sheep. I have always been intrigued, after reading her book *"The Voice of the Shepherd,"* how Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of how distasteful it is for some church member's idea of Jesus' calling them "sheep." She said:

*"Imagine my delight, then, when I discovered last Tuesday that someone I know actually grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest and that according to him sheep are not dumb at all. It is cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading that ugly rumor, and all because sheep do not behave like cows. According to my friend, cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips, 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," my friend said, 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.*

*Sheep tend to grow fond of their shepherds; my friend went on to say. It never ceased to amaze him, growing up, that he could walk right through a sleeping flock without disturbing a single one of them, while a stranger could not step foot in the fold without causing pandemonium. Sheep seem to consider their shepherd part of the family, and the relationship that grows up between the two is quite exclusive. They develop a language of their own that outsiders are not privy to. A good shepherd learns to distinguish a bleat of pain from one of pleasure, while the sheep learn that a cluck of the tongue means food, or a two note song means that it is time to go home.*

*In Palestine today, it is still possible to witness a scene that Jesus almost certainly witnessed two thousand years ago, that of Bedouin shepherds bringing their flocks home from the various pastures they have grazed during the day. 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 gives 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."*

We follow the shepherd whose voice we know.

In that same regard, Harvard's Dr. Barry Brazelton was demonstrating, to the television audience, the way that even very young infants quickly become aware of the identity of their parents and can recognize their parents just by the sound of their voices. He took an infant in his arms and asked us to watch the infant's eyes. He spoke to the baby. Then he asked other people to speak. There was little recognition from the baby.

Then the mother of the baby spoke and the baby's eyes visibly brightened, the infant turned toward the sound of the mother's voice. It was obvious that the child knew her mother's voice in distinction from other voices.

We follow the shepherd whose voice we know.

One of the important questions we have to ask ourselves in the church today is the question, whose voices are we following?

We have been involved in a bible study recently on Christians In the Age of Outrage. It was suggested by the author that one of the problems the church, and those who make up that body, are having today is that we are listening to the wrong voices. Just stop to think about the voices you listen to today. How many of those voices could pass the simple test we often hear today *“What would Jesus say?”*

The issue at the heart of this gospel lesson this morning is the matter of whose voice are our you listening to. If we are a part of his fold of sheep we listen to his voice.

The title of our sermon for this morning is Good Shepherd? Bad Shepherd? These questions need answered because of what Jesus is saying to us today in our gospel lesson. There are good shepherds who care for the flock who go out of their way to attend to the need of each sheep. If one is lost he goes to find it. If one is injured he tends to its wounds, if it is thirsty it leads it to still waters, if it is hungry he leads it to green pastures.

This is not only his job but it is his nature to care for the things placed within his care.

The other is a person who does not enter into the sheepfold by the gate but comes in over the gate in an attempt to steal the sheep. John’s gospel refers to that one as just a hired hand who does not care for those that are not his own.

What voices are you following today?

We can find such voices on Facebook every day. They attempt to steal us away from the true shepherd by sowing seeds of discontent among us. We find them on podcasts of people who have a great following who stampede us toward a dangerous cliff of destruction. Or someone who just because they may be a popular singer or actor or player of some sport we give to them the right to be the voice that leads us away from our Christian worldview and therefore every decision we make is tainted, and the life we live does not mirror those who are of the fold of Jesus.

How much time do you spend today listening to your favorite newscaster who peddles the brand of news you want to hear? How much time do you spend on Facebook or Instagram being fed all kinds of stuff that we assimilate into our lives that make us anything but sheep of Christ’s fold. And how much time do we spend reading scripture or books by trusted authors that offer suggestions for the problems that we face today that are based on the words and life of our Christ.

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 blasphemer or an impostor because they got their news from the wrong source.

Why are some able to believe and some not?

I do not know. Maybe even Jesus doesn’t know. He does not 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 are not my sheep because they don't know who I am and BELIEVE.”*

Ah, that’s the hard part, isn’t it? BELIEVE. We have been for some time in the season of Easter. For many people, Easter presents one of the greatest challenges to belief—all this talk of resurrection, and life from death. You will recall the young man I told you about who at the end of a particularly

glorious Easter service, with trumpets, and lilies, and the choir, and the sermon, and the crowds, emerged muttering to his pastor and to himself, *"I just don't know. I just can't be certain."*

Maybe you are the sort who can stand and say with sure voice, *"I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord..."*

Maybe you have never been bedeviled by doubts. That's great. 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 are not in my sheepfold, so of course, you don't believe."*

Note carefully: Jesus does not 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 are in the flock, you are one of his. You hear his voice and know him and he knows you and will not let you go.

Aren't we in the flock this morning? I am looking at a bunch of sheep right now who look like they are in the flock. There you sit, you sheep. Here I stand just as one of the sheep. Jesus says that is good enough for him. We in the flock so we hear his voice and he knows you and that's what it takes. He does not raise the bar that you have 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, does not seem to be the point at all of being one of his disciples. Rather, it is a simple matter of just hearing his voice and coming to follow, of being in the fold. Of hearing the voice and following the voice in the world where we live seven days a week.

We may not have your head straight on every article of the Apostles' Creed. We may not know what to think about the Doctrine of the Trinity. Maybe you even struggle to understand Easter? You thought you were fairly sure on that a couple of Sundays ago, but today, in the clear light of April, you're not so sure. Maybe, in just such uncertain times is when we really need a shepherd.

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 are here. You have heard the voice of Jesus and you have come into the fold. Somehow you have heard something that sounded in some way like the voice of God inviting you to come 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 is not a matter of what you can say, but a matter of what he says. It is his voice that keeps drawing us here and together we learn the disciplines of our faith that keep us together.

I've studied lots of theology, have spent a lifetime pouring over the Scriptures. But when it comes to how I stand before Christ, I am just like you. We have no right to be here except we have heard his voice. Furthermore, 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 that are in his fold.

And how he keeps us is the subject of next Sunday's message on Psalm 23.