

May 03, 2020

John 10:1-10

“The Sheep Hear His Voice”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out (John 10:3b).”

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I really don't know how many times that I have preached on John 10, known as the Good Shepherd Chapter of the New Testament, but I can say that it has been a lot, and yet, it never ceases to be a deep gold mine of clarity and comfort. We certainly need that today in a society of confusion and lots of bad advice. **The Sheep Hear His Voice**, and that is my prayer for you this morning because our Shepherd has a lot of good stuff to say to you and me.

So Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd and he calls us sheep. As I have said in the past, it isn't a very flattering comparison whatsoever. Sheep are not bright and they are extremely vulnerable. In ancient times, Shepherds were at the bottom of society - low class. But this is the way that our Savior would characterize our relationship. Both Shepherd and Sheep are the low and despised things, the things that are not, only to shame the things that are. We really do not belong down here do we? Rather, we belong in the kingdom - or as David writes in Psalm 23, the “green pastures” and “beside still waters.” It says in another Psalm (95:7) that “we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts.” And to harden one's heart means to end up losing one's faith as well as heaven. We look to Jesus for help in that regard - to soften us and strengthen our faith.

One cannot make themselves into sheep. Sheep do not choose their shepherds. Rather, shepherds always choose their sheep. Jesus says, “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who has sent me draws him (John 6:44).” Those are clear words and tie in perfectly with our theme **The Sheep Hear His Voice**. God's good gift to us is that, despite our refusal of him, he nevertheless chose us to be his own, calls us by name, and promises to lead us out. Only let us be extremely careful that we do not grow a calloused heart, or ears that no longer hear. Instead, as Luther writes, “When you have heard the Word, you earnestly kill the flesh and empty your soul. It will happen in no other way. No one becomes spiritual without his voice. This is the power of this [the Good Shepherd's] voice. The beginning of all spiritual knowledge is this voice.”

“He calls his own sheep by name.” It is my understanding that to this day shepherds in the land of the Bible still give names to certain sheep, if not the whole flock. He knows them by means of individual characteristics. You see this reflected in some of the names that Jesus personally gave to his apostles. For example, he gave to Simon the name Peter, which means Rock. To James and John he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder. Finally, in the book of Revelation (2:17) it says, “to the one who conquers ... I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.”

Stone is something that lasts. It is a symbol of forever. The stone is white. Whiteness indicates holiness, beauty, glory. To be holy, beautiful, and glorious in God's sight is to be declared forgiven. The shepherd laid down his life for the sheep in order that the dirt of sin might be removed and that our wool might be clean and truly, fully white. He takes his perfect life and gives it to the sheep. He takes the dirt

of the sheep as if it were his own. So, the shepherd cleanses his sheep through his own sufferings and death on the cross, where he removes from us the hell that we deserve, and replaces it with heaven. The new name written on the stone identifies the person who receives the stone. In the forgiveness of sins, the name expresses the newly created, inner character of the person; his or her distinct, individual and cleansed personality. Every one of the blessed is to have a particular and unique consciousness of his or her own now perfectly cleansed personhood.

He calls us by name and leads us out! Eastern shepherds do not drive their sheep. They lead them, often going before them. In the words of Fred H. Wight:

This does not mean that the shepherd is always in front of the sheep. Although he may be usually in that position when traveling, he often walks by their side, and sometimes follows behind, especially if the flock is headed for the fold in the evening. From the rear he can gather any stragglers, and protect such from a sly attack from a wild animal. If the flock is a large one, the shepherd will be in front, and a helper will follow behind.

The leading of our Good Shepherd is one that completely ensures our safety. All that he does is for the movement of the sheep to their final destination. He is a tender Shepherd to us in this life and knows what we need and when we need it. He is always in the right place at the right time to make sure that we make it out. Once again, He leads us out.

Out of where? In regard to the Lord's Coming of Salvation and our going out with him to our forever destination, we have these powerful words of the prophet Isaiah (52:11-12), "Depart, depart, go out from there; touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her; purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the Lord. For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight, for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard." The words tell us very clearly that we are being led us out of everything that is sin and death - "out from the midst of her," it says. Who is the "her" of this text?

Call her whatever you want: a "thief and a robber" as she is in our Gospel lesson, or "the woman folly" as Solomon does in Proverbs (9), or call her "Babylon" as John does in the book of Revelation (18); they are all one and the same. We are bid to avoid her as if she were a stranger to us, for her sins are heaped high as heaven. She is the one who would drag us down with her to be burned with forever fire. She would have us drink stolen water and eat secret bread. However, may we never forget that with her are the dead - "her guests are in the grave." Though she bids us to come to her with a sultry and soothing voice, may we hear the voice of our Shepherd and never allow her to take from us, either by stealth or force, what has been so graciously given. Remember, she comes to steal and kill and destroy

May God grant us grace to replace all of her enticements with what has been so freely given. Jesus leads us out and wants us, for now, to consider where he leads us to! He leads us by the power of the Spirit working in the means of grace into his presence and the presence of his Father. It says in Psalm 64, "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and

weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because *your steadfast love is better than life*, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.” Nothing we desire down here can compare to what we have in our Good Shepherd and where he is finally leading us. In the words of an article in *Good News* magazine (Issue 41):

God is in love with you! He doesn't want you to be SEPARATED from Him. Your graciously heavenly Father wants you to be in His presence forever. Through the bloody death and victorious Easter resurrection of His Son Jesus, your heavenly Father has made arrangements for you to be reunited with Him; as Paul writes: “God ... reconciled us to Himself through Christ ... (2 Corinthians 5:18).”

The Good Shepherd has come into this world to lead us to the destination that was planned before the beginning of time - fellowship with the Lord God. The Creator of the Universe made us so that we might have all that is or ever will be - Paradise - to be with the one who is forever love and everything good that comes from him. He leads us to that moment, as it says in Revelation, when “the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Indeed! In the Good Shepherd we can really say with Psalm 23:5 that “goodness and mercy *shall* follow us all the days of our lives, and we *shall* dwell in the house of the Lord forever!” It is not that we say that goodness and mercy *might* follow us all the days of our lives, but that it *shall* follow us all the days of our lives. Even more, we *shall* dwell in the house of the Lord! **The Sheep Hear His Voice.** May we know and believe that what he promises is trustworthy and true. He calls us by name and leads us out. And “It is impossible for God to lie (Hebrews 6:18).”

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott