

Good Shepherd Sunday (April 30, 2023)

Text: John 10:1-10

“Flock Behavior”

(or, “How to Be a Sheep without Getting Fleeced”)

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. As one commentator pointed out, *“It has been Good Shepherd Sunday for centuries. For centuries, we have had readings about the Good Shepherd. For centuries, we have listened to the twenty-third psalm read on this day.”*

The church has “for centuries” deemed it appropriate to use this Fourth Sunday of Easter as a day to focus on the tenth chapter of Saint John’s Gospel, the so-called “Good Shepherd” chapter. While I certainly did not have time to explore in depth, I did try to discover why this particular Sunday was so designated for this reading, but without success. It happens in all three years of the three-year lectionary. We are in Year A, so we read the first ten verses of the chapter this year; next year (B), we will read verses 11-18, and the year after that (C) verses 22-30.

I tell you this because it does seem, in some respects, like the Gospel reading for this day is somewhat curtailed. If we were to hear this for the very first time, I suspect that we would want to learn more. As it is, the opening of this tenth chapter is confusing, to say the least. We have learned to call Jesus “The Good Shepherd;” but in these ten verses, he also refers to himself as Shepherd, Gatekeeper, and Gate. Having a little trouble keeping the metaphors straight, are we?

As well we may. But Jesus is not concerned about plot line and character development in this story, this parable. He is very much interested that we come to a deeper understanding of Him and of ourselves.

Many of us grew up with the Twenty-third Psalm almost as wallpaper. It seemed to be always around everywhere. In Sunday School, in my case also parochial day school (and every year we had to recite it as a class in church on Sunday morning — probably this Fourth Sunday of Easter, now that I think about it), it was in sermons, and in hymns. It was one of those passages that I had to memorize for Confirmation Class.

I would bet that a good many of you could quote it today for memory, and not strain very much trying to do so. So we are quite familiar with this concept of Good Shepherd. We should be. We've heard it often enough.

What we are less familiar with is our role as sheep. You may have heard me say on other occasions being called a sheep is no great honor. Sheep are stupid. Sheep are smelly. Sheep really cannot fend for themselves. They are vulnerable to attack from many predators and subject to wandering off and getting lost. This we know. I think this we understand.

Sheep are stupid.

In our daily lives, all of us do stupid things. And when you do, I reminded you last Sunday, there were times when you said (to yourself or out loud), "*I knew I was going to do that!*" How stupid is that? If you knew you were going to do it, why didn't you keep yourself from doing such a stupid thing? Bill Cosby figured this out, I think. He said that when you ask a child, "*If I told you not to do it, why did you go ahead and do it?*" the child will answer, "*I don't know.*" Bill says this is evidence of the brain damage.

Some of the stupid stuff we do matters little in the long run. It might be embarrassing to stick your leg through the living room ceiling when you're in the attic looking for the Christmas decorations (as my father once did), but such embarrassment has hardly ever been fatal. When you watch some of the antics on home videos, you see a lot of stupid stuff, some of it not at all harmless. (Such shows on TV say that no one was hurt in the videos they air, but you can see that any lack of injury was by God's grace alone.)

What's really sad it that so much stupidity is not the result of snap decisions gone awry, but of supposedly careful planning. My sister sent me an e-mail some time ago that was titled, "*Why women live longer than men.*" It showed, among other things, a man on a metal stepladder standing in water changing a light bulb. Another shot revealed how some

guys had gerry-rigged three forklifts on top of each other to they could reach this really high shelf. We are all sheep (some of us more so than others, perhaps.)

Sheep are also smelly.

It's the lanolin in the wool, and when it gets dirty and damp — whew!!! Now, you may be inclined to say, "*Hey! I shower every morning! And I use good smelling soap, and deodorant, I put on clean underwear, clean slacks and shirt (or blouse and skirt — you know who you are). Some days I even use aftershave or perfume. So don't go telling me that I smell.*" Okay, most of us have learned the value of regular personal hygiene, and we practice it (some other cultures look at ours and suspect that we have become obsessive about the subject, but that's their problem).

But we are not making a physical comparison here; rather we are taking that odoriferous character of sheep and applying it to our spiritual character. In the Old Testament, our sins are described as a foul incense that has reached the nostrils of God, and has sickened Him. So use all the Right Guard and Glade and Febreze you want — when it comes to sin, no topical applications will do.

Sheep cannot fend for themselves.

This may be the biggest myth with which we live: our own capability. We deem ourselves self-sufficient. "*Why look! I can blow my own nose! I can get a fork from the plate to my mouth without puncturing my cheek! I drove my car here today, all by myself.*" But this is a myth tied to the Big Lie — Satan in the Garden of Eden telling Eve, "*You will not die. God told you not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because God knew that if you ate from it you wouldn't need Him any longer.*"

Oh, there are times when we readily admit that we cannot handle things — someone dies, a sickness strikes, we get laid off — and we turn to God in desperation and fear. But all too often we tend to act as if we call the

shots, we set the tone, we make the rules, we carry the day, and we are very much the star in our own video.

Sheep are vulnerable and wayward.

The Bible promises that God will send no trial or temptation that we cannot bear — but that doesn't mean that we do bear all that gets sent. I may know how to ride a bike, but if I haven't ridden in some time, I'm not going to get very far because I am out of shape. And if I allow myself to be distracted and pay more attention to the pretty flower by the side of the road than I do to the telephone pole ten feet in front of me — I could have handled the bike riding, but I didn't.

Many of us have no idea what spiritual gifts and strengths lie within us, and how much the Holy Spirit would use us if we would but discover how He has given us Himself to do the work. We become weak and flabby Christians when we fail to take advantage of the resources God has put at our ready disposal. And all too often, we put God on the back burner for another day, or for when we think we might need Him, and open the door wide for the Evil One to make a run at us.

So what are sheep to do? The Good Shepherd tells us. I'll start from the end and work forward.

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Jesus did not come so that we could have moral principles or guidebooks. Jesus came so that we might have life. There was a TV show in the later 90s that starred Clair Dane, “My So-Called Life.” I don't believe I caught a single episode (nor apparently did many others, because I think it lasted just one season), but the title reflected a kind of anxious despair so prevalent among some teenagers, that makes them see life as hardly worth going through the motions. I used to enjoy the TV show, “Night Court.” In one episode, the hypersexed Assistant D.A. Dan Fielding was hospitalized and refusing treatment for, I think, appendicitis. As Judge Harry Stone tried to convince him that he should have the surgery so he could get on with life,

Dan replied, *“I don’t have a life. I have a lifestyle.”*

Our art (if TV programming can be so elevated) sometimes does reflect our lives. Even those of us who basically enjoy our lives — oh, sure, we have ups and downs like everyone else, but on the whole, it’s pretty good — even we do not seem to have that “abundant life” Jesus affirms. Maybe it’s not a “lifestyle” or a “so-called life,” but neither is it something in which the glory of God radiates into every moment. We sheep should not be content until our lives are that abundant, aglow with God’s Spirit, filled with God’s presence, empowered by Christ Himself.

Jesus says, ***“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”*** You want that kind of abundant life? You cannot manufacture it. You cannot arrange it. You can’t buy, build, or barter for it. There is only one way — use the gate.

The imagery of pasture here (as in Psalm 23) is what gives the sheep access to life. For us, pastures are places of beauty and maybe sources of contentment; for sheep, they are the supermarket where the food is. Do you want to be richly fed spiritually? And that question is the rub! Do you want to be richly fed spiritually? Often we say, *“Well, sure!”* but when opportunities to hear the Word, study the Word, share the sacrament, be nurtured in fellowship, grow in discipleship arise — well, we may well have other plans, more important matters to attend to. We sheep need to feed on the pasture that God provides. One hour in worship will not provide the diet we need. It is simply not enough!

The Good Shepherd says that ***“When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”*** What does it mean to know the voice of Jesus?

In the chapter preceding the Good Shepherd chapter, John gives us the narrative of the blind man at the pool of Siloam. We heard that account on the Fourth Sunday in Lent. There the focus was on “seeing” and how faith is often an emerging, growing, developing sight — it does not come all at once, but as we begin to see, we also begin to sharpen our vision.

In this chapter, the focus is on “hearing.” Like any sense, this sense needs development and that comes by putting it to use.

When we have troubles in relationships, 90% of the time (all right, I confess, I made up that statistic; I’m still going to use it) those troubles stem from the fact that somebody is not hearing. Now, we often make the mistake of saying to the other person, “*You’re not listening to me.*” But, in fact, he is listening very intently, but for some reason, she is not hearing.

There are lots of reasons why we don’t get heard. When we yell, the other person finds it hard to hear (isn’t that ironic?). When we send “You” messages, we get shut off, not heard. When we are supposed to be listening and hearing, too often we listen only for that to which we can make some counter response, and wind up hearing the real point. And while this may sound silly, it is quite serious to relationships: if an internal processor and an external processor wind up talking to each other, NO hearing gets done at all.

Now, that goes a long way around the mulberry bush to get to this point. If we want to know the voice of Jesus, we need to hear Him. That begins in listening *to* Him, and that is not the same as reading *about* Him. Yes, we do need to “*read, mark, learn and inwardly digest*” the Word of God (as an ancient prayer invokes)— devour it, chew on it, let it feed your mind, your heart, your very soul. But that is not yet listening to Jesus. Just as a letter from home is welcome to the soldier stationed thousands of miles away, there is nothing so good as hearing the voice of your beloved, or your children, or other loved ones.

As important — faith-sustaining, guiding, informing — as the words of the Scriptures are, we sheep need to know the voice, not just the words, of the Good Shepherd. How do we do that? Spend some quiet time and just listen. Just listen. At first it may feel awkward, maybe even silly. But pray that the Holy Spirit would open you, settle you, drive away all distractions, impediments, and barriers, and let you just sit in the presence of the One who brings you life. And listen . . . listen . . . listen until you

hear His voice. It may be, as Elijah experienced it, just a “still, small voice” the merest whisper, the wind rustling the leaves. But as you listen, you will discover that the voice of Jesus comes sweetly, clearly, and you will hear, really hear the voice of the Shepherd.

John records that the disciples “*did not understand what he was saying to them.*” As if that were something new. But it tells us that maybe, just maybe, we won’t “get it” either — at first. Keep at it. We sheep have a lot of obstacles to overcome. We may be stupid, but we don’t have to stay stupid. We might be smelly, but cloaked in Jesus we are sweet incense to God. We might tend to wander off, but we remain confident that the Good Shepherd will leave no stone unturned, no gully unexplored to find and retrieve us. There are predators galore, but we remain safe in the sheepfold where our Good Shepherd is the gate.

No hireling, He. He cares for us, lives for us, died for us, came and comes for us. We are His. And if we know nothing else in this life, we have to know this: we are His. Because we are His, we want to hear His voice, know His voice, respond to His voice — and live, really, fully, joyously live!

Amen.