

SERMON  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
April 25, 2010

Acts 9:36-43  
Psalm 23  
Revelation 7:9-17  
John 10:22-30

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

I'm going to begin with a strange question today. How does it feel to be referred to as "sheep"? Is that a compliment, an insult, or just plain weird! According to the words today in John's Gospel, those who follow Jesus are referred to as "sheep".

Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me." So since we are all sheep, maybe we should talk some "sheep language". Come on, join with me; "baaaaa, baaaaa".

Oh, wait a minute. Some people in the church would call me a shepherd. You've heard the saying that the pastor is the "shepherd of the flock". Therefore, I don't have to baaaaa. Just all of you do.

I must admit that my experience with sheep is limited. I have seen them grazing from a distance. I might have even touched one at a petting zoo at some point in my life. I have on occasion eaten a lamb chop. I even got rather adventurous one year a long time ago and cooked a leg of lamb for Easter. Actually, I am somewhat allergic to wool.

Most of what I've heard about sheep is unflattering. They are known to be dumb animals. They are lacking in initiative and likely to fall over cliffs or entangle themselves in brush. They are not very playful. They are not really cute or cuddly like they were when they were lambs. They have no distinctive characteristics like rams do with their large horns.

Now how does that make you feel? Any better? The characteristics of sheep seem to go against what our society places value on. Things like ingenuity, creativity, and individuality. Our society encourages people to be leaders rather than followers. How many books do you find in the bookstore that talk about being a good follower – perfecting your followership skills?

Can you imagine parents urging their children to be good sheep, to aim for mediocrity in academics and sports? After all, we admire people with high levels of energy and a zest for exploration. No, to be a good sheep is not part of the American dream.

So what is Jesus saying here anyway? Is this the best way to describe his followers? Well again, we must look at the context in which he spoke these words. So let's have a little history lesson. I actually like history. I find it fascinating.

I truly believe that the study of history is essential in helping us to understand not only life as it was, but life as it is today – and for that matter, what life might be like in the future. The study of history is certainly essential for understanding Scripture. So let's set the stage.

It was the 25<sup>th</sup> of Chisleu, 167 B.C. Chisleu was a month of the year that would be around our November or December. The Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes had forbidden Jews to continue to practice their religion, and had instead tried to force them to worship the god Zeus.

As an act of total disrespect for the Jewish faith, he had an altar set up in the temple in Jerusalem and sacrificed a pig on this altar. Well, this was the ultimate insult for the Jewish nation.

This led to a revolt known as the Maccabean Revolt. It was initiated by a priest named Mattathias and then continued under the leadership of his son Judas known as Maccabeus, “the hammer”.

The revolt was successful, and the temple was rededicated, with proper sacrifice being offered once again, beginning on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Chisleu, 164 B.C., exactly three years after the desecration. An eight day feast was held to commemorate the event which continued each year from then on.

A hallmark of the feast is the lighting of lamps and a sense of joy. This festival is still celebrated today. It is called *The Feast of Lights*, or what is commonly known as *Hanukkah*.

So this is the context in which Jesus is walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. It was here that the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

Now, this was not a serious question. It was a taunt. Again, they were trying to entrap Jesus – to trip him up so that they would have the evidence they needed to get rid of him once and for all.

After all, those who were there celebrating would have been mindful not only of the liberation and the restoration of the Temple, but of kings and kingship – the tyrant Antiochus whom the Maccabees resisted, and of course the current villainous puppet king, Herod the Great.

During this day, if anyone was to have the status of Messiah, it would be Judas Maccabeus. He had taken up where David had left off.

But instead of talking about kings and messiahs, Jesus talks about a shepherd. How controversial could this be we might ask? What could be wrong with the rabbi Jesus calling himself a good shepherd?

In fact, these words would have been extremely offensive to the religious elite. It was a claim with a socio-economic edge to it. A modern-day equivalent might be for Jesus to say, as Nancy Blakely has noted, “I am the good migrant worker.”

You see, John is doing in his gospel something that Luke does in his. In the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus similarly scandalizes his hearers. The kingdom comes, he says, in surprising, unpredictable ways, through unheralded people and events, through a God who turns our expectations and our prejudices upside down.

The Good Samaritan. The Good Shepherd. Those who are lowly, contemptible; those who are discounted in a world of power and prestige – pay attention to these, the Gospel writers seem to say. For God is probably at work in their midst. The Good Samaritan gives fully of himself to save a stranger. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

So there is our history lesson for today. Hopefully, it will help us to understand the gravity of not only the question, “Are you the Messiah”, but also the answer; “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

You see, Jesus could not answer that question directly. He would have been arrested on the spot and brought before the authorities. So instead, he talks about a relationship – a relationship between a shepherd and his sheep, and a Father and a Son.

And he says; “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” So now we are back to where I started this sermon. Indeed, we are the sheep in this story. But the shepherd we follow is not necessarily the one we might have been taught to believe in growing up.

This is a troublemaking shepherd that questions authority. This is a shepherd who breaks Sabbath laws, who turns over tables in the Temple with a whip, who loves enemies, who heals the sick, who releases the captives, who lifts up the poor and oppressed, and who threatens the rich and the powerful.

And most of all, this is a shepherd who makes no distinction among the sheep. For the Good Shepherd calls, welcomes and accepts sheep who are considered “sinners”, sheep who are considered “outsiders”, sheep who are a different shade than white, sheep who have wandered, sheep who are lost, sheep who are sick, sheep who are laughed at and ridiculed because they are different, sheep who are hurting and lonely.

These are the sheep that Jesus calls unto himself, and as followers of this Jesus, we too must be about the work of the shepherd. And the only way we can do that is to hear his voice. But the problem is that we are sometimes selective in our hearing.

Two men were walking along a crowded city sidewalk. Suddenly, one of the men remarked; “Listen to the lovely sound of that cricket.” The other man stopped for a moment to listen, but could not hear the cricket.

He asked him; “How can you hear the sound of a cricket with the roar of the traffic and the sound of people passing by?” Well, come to find out, the first man was a zoologist who had trained himself to hear the sounds of nature.

He decided not to explain to his friend in words how he could hear the sound of the cricket, but instead, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a half-dollar coin, and then dropped it onto the sidewalk. They then watched as a dozen people suddenly turned, and began to look for the coin as they heard it clanking around amid the sounds of the traffic and the sounds of the people.

He then turned to his friend and said; “We hear what we listen for.” “We hear what we listen for.”

So what do we hear when we listen to Jesus? Think of the issues that face us both personally and communally as the body of Christ.

Personally, what do we hear when we listen to Jesus when we have been wronged by someone we love and are struggling to forgive? What do we hear when we listen to Jesus when we are tempted to do something that would not be in the spirit of loving our neighbor? What do we hear when we listen to Jesus when we see others in need?

What do we hear when we listen to Jesus when our selfish desires seem to be getting the best of us? What do we hear when we listen to Jesus when we have been diagnosed with a serious disease? What do we hear when we listen to Jesus after we have just suffered the tragic loss of a loved one?

Communally, what do we hear when we listen to Jesus when our country engages in pre-emptive wars in foreign lands?

What do we hear when we listen to Jesus when we pollute and destroy God's creation? What do we hear when we listen to Jesus when the sanctity of life is diminished?

What do we hear when we listen to Jesus when a law is passed that will enlist law enforcement officials to hunt down and arrest undocumented immigrants, most of them fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?

What do we hear when we listen to Jesus? When we truly block out all of the other voices that bombard us each and every day – the news media, the politicians, the advertisements. What do we hear when we listen to Jesus alone?

Because we are sheep, the more we follow the shepherd, the more we will hear and understand his voice.

Finally, I would like to close with a different image. I have been mainly focusing on Jesus being the shepherd and we being the sheep. However, in our second reading from Revelation, Jesus is no longer the Shepherd, but the sheep, rather the lamb. The lamb who was slain to take away the sins of the world.

Do you see the connection? The God of the universe becomes a human. The Shepherd becomes a lamb. And the lamb gives his life.

And therefore, the followers of the Lamb will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

I think being a sheep is okay, as long as Jesus is our Shepherd and it is only his voice that we listen to. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

## CHILDREN'S SERMON

Are any of you allowed to answer the telephone when it rings at your house?

Now let's pretend that you don't have caller ID or can't read. When you answer the phone can you sometimes know who it is just by hearing them talk? Sometimes we can know who it is even if we cannot see the person.

Did you know that baby's can know their mommy's voice when they are just a few days old? They know their mommy's voice because even when they were in her tummy, they could hear her. And it makes them feel safe.

Did you know that animals are the same way? If any of you have a dog, you know that when you call them, they know your voice. Sheep are the same way when they hear the voice of their shepherd.

In our Bible story today, Jesus says that we are like sheep and he is our shepherd. What are some ways that we can hear Jesus' voice? *Listening to the readings from the Bible, when we pray, when we come to church, when we go to Sunday School.*

A shepherd wants his sheep to be safe. In the same way, Jesus always wants the best for us because he loves us very much. All we need to do is to listen to him and follow him just like sheep follow a shepherd.

Let us pray... Jesus, help us to hear your voice, and help us to always follow that voice. Amen.