

John 10:22-30

All we like sheep have gone astray! That's all I could think about as I was preparing to write today's message. The full verse comes from Isaiah 53:6 "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Today is Shepherd Sunday, the day we recognize Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Shepherds don't mean much to us in this day and age. We still have shepherds, probably riding motorcycles, but most of us are so far removed from that food source that we don't have a clue what it would be like to shepherd living out in the wilderness, using a rock for a pillow, walking miles every day, making sure the sheep have food and water, and protecting them from wild animals. We would be putting our lives on the line to save the sheep. I don't know that many of us would be willing to be injured to save a sheep.

As I was researching I discovered that sheep aren't as stupid as they're made out to be. Their brain is almost as large as a human and they can learn to recognize pictures and recall them up to 2 years later. Their favorite treat is willow leaves. One farmer was near his daughter every time she fed a new batch of lambs willow leaves. As those lambs grew into sheep they would follow the farmer wherever he went, even if he didn't hand them willow leaves. When those sheep became leaders of the flock, they would follow the shepherd. As the herd instinct took root the other sheep would follow their leaders, who followed the shepherd. This shepherd could control as many as 1000 sheep at a time because their leaders recognized and followed the shepherd. This shepherd knows his sheep and his sheep know him. It makes more sense, now that we know sheep aren't as dumb as we thought, that Jesus would choose the image of a shepherd.

Now, as for Jesus speaking to the religious leaders telling them they do not believe because they do not belong to his flock goes back to the 34 chapter of Ezekiel where the prophet calls the shepherd-kings bad because they do not feed their sheep, instead they are gluttons who hoard everything good.

Jesus is not like a stranger or hired hand who do not know the sheep, who may even run away when danger approaches. Jesus has a strong connection with his sheep. One of my sources indicated that Jesus' being in Jerusalem for the festival of the Dedication, which is now known as Hanukkah, was intentional. The festival celebrates the victory of the Maccabees over foreign invaders during the time between the Old and New Testament. They had given their lives to defend their nation. They were completely devoted to God and the temple, and they preserved their people. Just as Jesus was preparing to give up his life for his people, and for the Gentiles.

The Jewish leaders wanted Jesus to declare himself the Messiah, but Jesus said his actions spoke for him. the reason they couldn't understand was because they weren't of his flock, they couldn't understand his voice. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." I think the biggest comment I have heard in ministry is, "I don't hear Jesus talking to me." That is the same thing Martin said when he came to see Pastor Carl.

Pastor Carl greeted him, "Hello, Martin. Come on in to the office," Pastor Carl held open the door for him. "Oh, don't worry about your shoes." "They're muddy and I really should take them off," Martin said. "Besides if I don't, I'll be hearing my mother's voice telling me to take them off before coming into your office."

Pastor Carl smiled. "Fair enough." After a few moments, Martin took the offered seat across from Pastor Carl. "So how are you finding our church?" Pastor Carl asked. "I know you mentioned we're a bit more casual and smaller than you are used to."

"First Church is certainly those things, but you know I actually like that about the congregation. When I was in the city, the church we attended was so large I didn't really get to know people and while I'm okay with the formality, I have to say that I like the relaxed feeling I get when I come in through the doors here."

"Some of that comes from the fact that everyone knows everyone else and the town is small enough that we don't really stand on ceremony for most things. I guess even the funerals here are a bit less formal than I had in my other churches." Pastor Carl paused. "So are you liking it here?"

"I am, and am settling in nicely with Marjorie and the boys. They love the children's program and all the volunteers." Martin took a deep breath. "That's actually why I feel comfortable enough to come here and talk about the Bible reading on Sunday. Something about it bothered me."

"Oh?" Pastor Carl tilted his head. "What passage?" "The one from John's gospel. I'll admit that some of it was confusing but you were clear in your sermon that the writer put layers of meaning in each line so I'm okay not understanding everything." Martin squirmed in place. "The verse that actually made me uncomfortable was when Jesus talked about being the good shepherd and his sheep knowing his voice."

"Okay." Pastor Carl sat back in his chair. "What bothers you about that?" "Well," Martin said. "It bothers me because I've always thought of myself as a Christian and I grew up in the church. I mean I know I haven't always been the best attender but since we had the boys, we've tried to be here every Sunday." "Which is wonderful."

"I also read my Bible each day and make sure I pray morning and night. When I heard that verse I realized that even though I see myself as a disciple, I don't think I have ever heard Jesus' voice." Martin sighed. "Does this mean that I'm not one of his sheep? What am I doing wrong, Pastor?"

Pastor Carl leaned forward. "I haven't known you for long but I think you're a good Christian who wants to grow in faith and who is trying to be one of God's people. You believe, you serve, you give, and you strive to follow Jesus, don't you?"

"I do." Martin nodded. "With all my heart. I've just never heard Jesus." "Really?" "I haven't." Martin frowned. "Is there something wrong with me? Is God angry with me?"

"I don't think so," Pastor Carl said. "If I were to guess I think what the Bible says and what you heard are two different things." "What do you mean?"

"While some people may actually hear the voice of Jesus in their lives as clear as you hear me speaking to you right now, many of us, including me, we hear the voice of Jesus less directly." Pastor Carl held up his hand. "Please don't misunderstand me hearing Jesus less directly is just as important and valuable and life changing."

"What do you mean?" "When you came into my office just a few minutes ago you said you heard your mother's voice." Pastor Carl tilted his head. "You didn't actually hear her speaking to you, did you?"

"No, of course not." Martin shook his head. "My mother lives on the other side of the country. I meant that her lessons about not tracking mud in from outside was one that is

ingrained in me. So when I see my shoes are muddy, it is like I'm hearing her tell me that they need to be taken off before I enter a room."

"Exactly," Pastor Carl said. "In the same way, when Jesus says that we hear his voice it is that we hear the truth which is given to us through the Bible and all the lessons we have learned by following as a disciple and from other Christians. When we pray, we come to know what Jesus asks of us and calls us to be in the world even if we don't actually hear actual words being spoken to us."

"Huh, I never thought about it that way. " Martin said. "That actually makes sense because there have been times when I've prayed about something I'm not sure about and by the end of the prayer, I know what I am supposed to do and how I'm supposed to be as a disciple."

"Sometimes we have to pray about something for a while before we hear an answer. Other times, we need to listen to faithful and good people because Jesus can speak through them as well."

"You know what?" Martin asked, "I think maybe Jesus has spoken to me this morning."

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me," says Jesus (v. 27). They follow him because they know they will receive the three things that sheep need to thrive: to be well-fed, to be safe and not stressed and to have someone looking out for them.

Those three things are what Jesus means when he said he gives his sheep eternal life, and they will never perish. This is an abundant life that is only possible because Jesus puts others needs before his own. Jesus prioritizes the needs of others, and his sheep know this. This is the promise of the Good Shepherd. Jesus is God as a human and has the power to keep us safe from the evils of this world.

We listen to what he has said and when we follow we will be given eternal life and will never perish.
All glory be to God.