

## ***The Never Lost Option***

John 10:22-30

April 29, 2007

### **I.**

Has anyone recently rented a car from Hertz? If you have, you might have noticed an option that the company gives you called "Never Lost." It's a Global Positioning Satellite system in your car that enables you to find just about anything you want, from directions, to hotels, to restaurants. If you are driving in a strange city and have a craving for sushi, Never Lost will find the place for you.

Today's Gospel describes another "never lost" system. Unlike the Hertz system it's not based on satellites but rather Christ's sacrifice on the cross. And unlike the Hertz System it doesn't show maps to destinations in this world, but rather offers an option for an eternal destination in the next world.

But if you avail yourself of this spiritual never lost system, you can rest assured that the Christian hope of life forever in the presence of our Lord will be yours. And our reading tells us how it works.

### **II.**

Today's Gospel raises two inextricably intertwined questions. They cannot be separated. One is "who is Jesus," and the other is "who are the sheep."

The reading begins with Jesus being asked by some Jews to say whether he was the Messiah. They said "how long will you keep us in suspense." Right away we see that they didn't understand, and they were trying to shift the blame to Jesus for their own ignorance.

That is a typical human reaction. How many times have we felt that we are in suspense because we don't think we have clear answers to some eternal questions? But Jesus answered the Jews, and his answer to them also is the answer to us.

He said he already had told them, and that "the works that I do in my Father's name testify to me." Jesus pointed to his works not for their own sake, but rather as a basis for belief in him. Jesus basically said that if he was not who he said he was, then he could not have done the things that he did.

And because Jesus is who he says he is, the second question about the sheep is placed squarely on the table. I think we all understand that Jesus used the term "sheep" as a metaphor to describe people who hear his Word, believe it, and follow him in the ways in which they live in the world.

But the question of how people can become Jesus' sheep is another matter that has produced disagreement and very different beliefs within the church. Thus, while today's Gospel is a source of assurance to believers, it also is a source of controversy and doctrinal division over just who, exactly, can claim that assurance.

### **III.**

Let's briefly look at these theological issues. At times the truth just does not proclaim itself until the underlying questions are resolved, and today's Gospel is an example. So we do have to address these questions, and you might want to turn to the Gospel reading on page four of your bulletin insert.

Jesus said toward the end of the reading that he gives his sheep eternal life, that they will never perish, and that no one can snatch them from his hand. They never will be lost. That is the assurance. The next two sentences at the end generate the uncertainty.

Jesus then said, "what the Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one." This has been translated and interpreted in several ways, and two of them are the most widespread.

The first idea is that Jesus was referring to an attribute or characteristic of his own nature that had been given to him by the Father, and that the Father also retains it because Jesus and the Father are one. This approach proclaims the Father has given Jesus the power and authority to offer salvation and eternal life to those who hear and follow him, and this power and authority will never be changed.

The other interpretation is that the Father's gift was not an attribute or characteristic of Jesus at all, but rather was the selection, in advance, of the sheep who would be saved by Jesus. This is a theory of predestination that claims we have no role whatsoever in whether we will be saved.

These two interpretations raise the paradox of free will and election. They present the question of whether we can do anything at all to save ourselves and be part of Jesus flock, or whether God already has decided and the matter is entirely out of our hands.

#### **IV.**

So, who is right? Well, the first interpretation is that of traditional Anglicanism. We believe the Father's gift to Jesus in today's Gospel is the *power* to save and is not the *identities* of specific people to be saved. This conclusion is described in our Catechism pages 850-51 of the Book of Common Prayer, and it promises that all who believe in Christ will be brought into the kingdom of God.

In short, the Episcopal Church does not accept the strict doctrine of predestination. For centuries the church has taught that through the leading of the Holy Spirit all people have the opportunity, by their own free will, to come to belief, faith and salvation. That is what we mean when we say Christ died for us.

And while we know that the capacity to believe in Jesus is a divine work that does not result solely from human effort; we also understand that the Holy Spirit will draw us to God if we sincerely ask.

Some of our friends in denominations that adhere to what is called reformed theology, however, would say otherwise. They would say that today's reading clearly implies that only the elect will be saved, that God already has determined who the elect are, and that no individual person can do anything to change that.

Now, granted, our friends also probably would tell us we all are among the elect because we would not be sitting here in church today if we were not. They would say that if God had not transformed our hearts we would not have heard God's word.

But if you pressed them, they also would say that we were selected by God in advance, that we had no choice in the matter, and that we became Christians not of our own free will but because God, by transforming us, basically decreed that we would hear and respond to his call.

That is the basic theological debate, and I don't intend to belabor it further other than to mention some difficulties with the idea of predestination and that God already has picked out a group of the elect.

Think about it. If only the elect are saved, what good does it do to pray for salvation of friends or family members who have not yet come to the Lord? They either are saved or not irrespective of our prayers. Also, what good does it do to instruct our children about living Christian lives if their eternal destinies already have been determined apart from anything we might do or say?

In a larger sense, what does predestination do to the idea of evangelism? Why go into the world and preach the Gospel? If the elect already are to be saved, then it seems we would be wasting our time talking to them, and we would have no hope of success in talking to someone not among the elect.

## V.

With that background, what can we learn from today's reading that has meaning for us today? Well, in order to be part of Jesus' flock we must do two things.

The first is to listen, to believe that Jesus died for us in this world, and to have faith in Jesus' promise of eternal life in the next world. The second is to follow him, and to do the good works that come from a sincere faith.

But listening is not always easy, and following can be even harder. Background noise and clutter can distract us from hearing what our Lord wants us to hear, and the pace of contemporary life can divert us from doing what he wants us to do.

Sometimes that small still voice within us cannot be detected without a spiritual hearing aid. Sometimes we are just sitting there with the remote and surfing the channels of life without really paying much attention. And sometimes our schedules and day planners become filled with too much of our own agendas and not enough of what God calls us to do.

But through prayer, spiritual disciplines, worship, and participating in our common life together here at St. Thomas we can more clearly hear our shepherd's voice. We can adjust our hearing aids to filter out the noises that draw us into the secular world, and we can use the remote to pick the channels that carry the Lord's programs, so to speak. And we can use our time and talents as faithful stewards of the gifts that God has given us.

## VI.

So where are we with today's Gospel? I believe today's reading from John confirms that salvation and eternal life are offered as free gifts to every person who has lived, is living and ever will live.

It is an offer that, if we accept it, allows us to experience God's grace. It is an offer that calls us to a way of life that not only affects what we do, but also will be evident to those around us. It is an offer that promises that if we are intentional about our own spiritual lives, then we will be able to live within the peace and security of our Lord's flock.

I began this sermon by mentioning the optional Never Lost GPS system on Hertz rental cars. But we really have been talking about another type of "never lost" system that also is optional. It is a system that is exclusive, and yet is inclusive. It is a choice that sets us apart from the secular world, and yet it invites those in the secular world to join us. And it is God's gift to us. *Amen.*