

The Shepherd's Voice

John 10:1-10

April 13, 2008

I.

Many years ago I grew up on a farm. From before I was in the first grade until I left for college my family raised cattle, sheep, and hogs.

And I can tell you from first hand experience, sheep were the worst. They were stupid, stubborn, smelly, dirty, near-sighted, got lost easily, and couldn't even find their own way into the barn. They took the most work, and in those days they produced the smallest profit.

I wonder if God sometimes looks at us in the same way. Perhaps that's why biblical stories about animals usually involve sheep. Except for the idolatry of the golden calf can you think of any important biblical events where the moral of the story somehow involved cattle? And it's a lot easier to think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd rather than the Good Cowboy, isn't it?

The basic characteristics of sheep lend themselves to figures of speech that help describe Jesus' teachings to us, and our relationship with God. Think about that for a minute. Are there no animals other than these foolish, mindless sheep that can be used as an image or symbol for humanity?

It would seem not. Biblical writers frequently used stories about sheep and shepherds to make a larger point, and today's Gospel reading is a good example.

II.

This story from John's Gospel actually has three parts. In the first part, Jesus talked about how the shepherd enters the sheepfold by the gate, and calls his own sheep and leads them out. And he said that the sheep follow because they know his voice. The point here is that if we are in Jesus' flock, then we will know him and follow where he leads us.

Apparently the audience didn't get that point. The reading said they did not understand this figure of speech, so Jesus tried again. And here, in this second part, he added a twist to the story. Jesus said, "I am the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters by me will be saved and find pasture." At this point, Jesus backed it up a notch. Here he told us how we even get to be part of his flock in the first place. We only do it through him.

Finally, in the third part, he changed the subject to include himself as well as us. He said that he came that we may have life, and have it abundantly. And here he did not mean that because of him we will have lots of worldly things, but rather that we will grow in spiritual things. This idea of abundance is based on quality, not quantity.

III.

Each part of today's reading helps to explain some of the enduring questions of our faith. A lot of theology is packed into these ten verses. Let's look at them.

The first part, where Jesus spoke of entering the sheepfold and calling out his sheep, presents the image of a large secure enclosure with many shepherds and many flocks. This type of sheepfold was used to serve a larger population of sheep, and there was a gatekeeper who admitted the shepherds when they appeared. And, as Jesus said, if someone tried to enter any other way they would be assumed to be thieves or robbers.

Now, since this all was a figure of speech, what did Jesus mean? The thieves and robbers who steal the sheep describe the false prophets and ungodly teachers who corrupt God's Word. The other flocks represented the collection of worldly things that draw us away from a life in Christ, and their shepherds are the organizers and leaders who foster and support them. Jesus, of course, was the teacher and prophet who spoke to a growing flock of believers in him.

In this explanation of Jesus' role as a shepherd, he spoke of how his sheep hear and follow because they recognize his voice. In this setting he was talking about living among the temptations and distractions of the world, and how we must listen for him as we navigate those waters. In today's terms he was offering guidance for us in our daily lives now. This was a summary of the Christian vocation.

But the people did not get the message. And from other parts of John's Gospel we can assume that Jesus was speaking to some Pharisees, other Jews who were there, and his disciples.

As a result, Jesus expanded his teaching. In addition to having explained about how we live in this world, he now spoke of our salvation in the next. He said that he was the gate for the sheep, and that anyone who came through him as the gate would be saved, and would come and go and find pasture.

He was making clear that he is the way. He is the only way from mortal life to eternal life; from worldly life to spiritual life. This foreshadowed Jesus' words few chapters later when he said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6).

And this is a door through which we must go by faith. It is our choice to open the door and walk through. But the door won't open if we are not sincere in making that choice. Jesus is not an insurance policy that is comforting to have around, just in case.

To go through that door means to actually enter into him. It means to accept that he died on the cross for our sins, and when we do that we will be empowered to live in a more holy and Christian way. We not only will be saved in the future, but we also will be able now to come and go and find pasture, so to speak.

Finally, let's consider Jesus' proclamation that he came so that we may have abundant lives. Many of you might recall the 1989 hit song by the rock group, Queen, "I want it all, and I want it now." Is that what Jesus offers? Well, that all depends on what we mean by that little word, "it."

I want it all, and I want it now. The lyrics of the song describe someone seeking material things. And today's Gospel reference to abundance will not be helpful in that search.

Abundance does not necessarily mean prosperity, although through God's grace we might prosper. Abundance does not promise health or longevity, although through God's grace we might have both. And abundance is not a story that begins with "once upon a time" and ends with "they lived happily ever after," even though through God's grace we might be able to do exactly that.

Abundance in this reading is being content in the knowledge that God will help us through our difficulties, and that he will supply our needs as may be best for us. It is the belief that when we make choices and decisions based on Christ's teachings we will be blessed and know his peace.

Against that background, let's look at those lyrics by Queen once again. I want it all, and I want it now. What if we tweaked the setting a little, and instead of thinking about acquisition and consumption, we substituted salvation and sanctification? Then, where do we go if we want it all and we want it now? Today's Gospel is the answer. Jesus Christ is the source of it all, and he's the source of it now. He gave it all, and we can have it now.

IV.

So, what will we take with us today as we go out and work on the spring clean-up of our building and grounds? I'm reminded of the TV ad where two consultants were sitting at a table with a company executive. The consultants had just presented a plan to help the company grow, and the executive said, "That sounds great, let's do it." Looks of uncertainty come over the consultants' faces, and one of them responded, "Oh, we don't actually do anything, we just advise."

Jesus did more than offer advice, and as we go out to actually do things with our facilities, I pray that we can remember what Jesus actually did for us, and who he actually is for us. He died to save his sheep, to use the biblical image, and he rose from the dead to serve his sheep. He lives in our hearts and hears our prayers. That can be immensely comforting when he directs our lives. He is the good shepherd, and if we are in his flock we will never be lost. *Amen.*