Sermon | Easter 4C

TEXT: John 10:22-30

17 April 2016

“Our Shepherd’s Voice”

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

Christ is risen. [**He is risen indeed. Alleluia**.]

Jesus said: “My sheep hear my voice. And I know them. And they follow me.”

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Dear saints,

Good Shepherd Sunday is really wonderful Sunday to be a preacher. Because it’s really so simple. The message for Good Shepherd Sunday, is simply this: Jesus is your Shepherd, you are his sheep. And that means, that he knows you. You belong to him, as a sheep in the Good Shepherd’s flock. And he’s never, ever going to let the wolf snatch you from his hand. Oh no, he takes care of you. He protects you and provides for you. He guides you to the green pastures and the still waters of his presence. And at the end, you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Jesus knows you. He is your shepherd. You are his sheep.

And we can be sure because we’re baptized.

**[**This morning we witnessed little Jasper Wyatt being brought into the Good Shepherd’s flock by Baptism. And so it was for you, on the day of your Baptism.**]**

Baptism unites us to Jesus. This is where we are joined to him, where we become a sheep in the Good Shepherd’s flock. So that each and every one of us can point to the font and say, “That’s how I know Jesus knows me. That’s how I know I am one of his own. I am baptized.”

Two quick things about how Jesus knows you. First, Jesus says, you have his name written on your forehead. [Rev. 22:4] Second, he has your name engraved onto the palm of his hand. [Is. 4:16]

First, his name is on your forehead. We know that, with certain farm animals, especially ones that are used to mingle with animals of other flocks and herds, they’re branded with the sign of the owner. And so, as baptized people, we need to think of ourselves as branded. We have Jesus’ name on us. We’ve been marked with the sign of the cross upon our foreheads and on our hearts, a sign which says to the devil and the world, “this one is taken.” This one has an owner, a master, the Lord Jesus.

And the flip side of that coin is that Jesus says, he has your name engraved on his hand. And the picture here, is: imagine two teenagers, a boy and a girl talking. And the boy asks for the girl’s number. She gives it to him. But he doesn’t have anything to write **on**. So he says, “I’ll write it on my hand.” But now, imagine he doesn’t have anything to write **with**. So he says, “I’ll engrave it onto my hand.” And that’s the picture. Your name is engraved on the palm of Jesus’ hand, written in blood, by the nail that pierced him. Jesus knows you. He is your Shepherd.

But what does it mean that we are his sheep? And here, we have to admit, in any other context, any other situation outside of Good Shepherd Sunday, if somebody calls you a sheep, you’re not likely take it as a compliment. Because sheep don’t really have a lot going for them. You don’t see many sports teams using sheep as mascots. They’re not tough: lions, tigers, bears. They’re not quick like falcons or cheetahs. They’re not intelligent, clever like owls or foxes. Someone last year actually contradicted me on that, “pastor, sheep really are intelligent.” But here’s the thing, they don’t act like it. At the Children’s Zoo a couple of years ago, we were at the sheep pen, somebody dropped a camera, and they acted like a bomb went off, scattered. And so the point is that it doesn’t seem like sheep have a lot going for them. In fact, we tend to think first of their negative qualities. If somebody calls you a sheep, what they usually mean is you’re a blind follower, usually, of religion. We might think too of how they are prone to wander. Now that’s a quality that the Bible does compare to us. Isaiah says, “*All we like sheep have gone astray*.” Just as sheep are prone to wander from the shepherd, so are we prone to wander from God.

Again, does a sheep have anything going for it? It doesn’t have sharp claws. It doesn’t have vicious fangs. It doesn’t have speed, or intelligence, or quickness, or strength. A sheep has really got nothing!

Maybe that’s the point. Maybe that’s exactly what Jesus is trying to teach us, by calling us sheep: that we’re really nothing without him. We need him. We can’t make it in the world without him. We are not strong enough to face down the wolves of this life on our own. We need our Shepherd.

And so the Christian life, as Jesus teaches today, is a life of totally dependence. That we are totally dependent on him for everything. From the littlest things to the greatest things. From daily bread, to the forgiveness of sins that comes through his death. From clothing and shoes, food and drink, to the crushing of the wolf, that is, the destruction of our enemy the devil, which he does at the cross. We need our Shepherd for everything. **Our life is a dependent life. We depend on Jesus for everything.**

And that’s really nothing more than to say, our life is a life of faith. And what is faith? Faith which is the living trust of the heart that forsakes ourselves—in faith we say, “I’ve got nothing, no way to protect or provide for myself. I need a Shepherd.” In faith we forsake ourselves and clings to Jesus, to his Word and promises, for everything we need. This brings us to one important piece of equipment for every sheep to have. That is their ears. Every sheep needs a set of ears to survive. Because every sheep needs to be able to hear their shepherd’s voice.

I once heard a story from a pastor—I wrote about in the welcome—pastor in Australia, one of the members of his congregation was a farmer and had a flock of sheep. One day the farmer took the pastor out to see his sheep, 4,000 of them. At first, as they approached—they we’re driving in a truck—the sheep took off at the sound of the truck’s engine. But then the shepherd started calling them. And his call was “Hey, bob. Hey, bob.” [Those of you that have kids might want to try it. Especially if you have as many as I do and you start forgetting their names.] But then, he said, an amazing thing happened. At the sound of the shepherd’s voice, all of the sheep—a sea of sheep—converged around the voice of the shepherd.

If there’s one thing a sheep has going for it, it’s his ears. Jesus says, “*My sheep hear my voice*.”

One more quick story. Growing up, we belonged to a small Church in downtown Baltimore, there was a time of a long vacancy, 4 year vacancy where we were without a regular pastor. And we had this retired pastor serving us. He was a great, wonderful man. He had a little bit of a speech impediment, made it sort of hard to understand him, like the Godfather. But because he was our shepherd, and we heard his voice, week in, week out, after four years, every single person in that congregation could understand him? We’d have visitors drop by, and say, “What’s he saying?” But we knew, we could understand. It was just as Jesus says, “*My sheep hear my voice*.”

And we hear our Shepherd’s voice, the voice of Jesus in his Word. In his Law that reveals our sin, crushes our pride. In his Gospel that forgives our sins and works faith in our hearts. We hear our Shepherd’s voice in his Word. And we need his Word, again and again throughout our lives. And that’s because of what Psalm 23 tells us. You know, Psalm 23—as beloved as this Psalm is to us—doesn’t sugar coat things. Do you know how David describes this life in Psalm 23? He calls it the valley of the shadow of death. That means we’ve got trouble, many dangers. We’ve got death awaiting us. We’ve got the devil prowling around like a roaring lion, seeking to devour us. We’ve got our own flesh which, is most of the time our own worst enemy, prone to wander, stray from the God who loves us, like the prodigal son who rebelled against his father. This life is the valley of the shadow of death. We’ve got trouble.

You know, I think, sometimes the world gets the wrong idea about us as Christians. Sometimes it seems people outside the Church have this perception of people inside the Church, that we think of ourselves as people who’ve got it together, that we do what God asks, that we live decent, good lives, and that we don’t have very problems or struggles. We know that nothing could be further from the truth. Some people say, “I’ll go to Church only after I fix my life and make all the wrongs right.” What would we say to that? We would say, we don’t come to Church because everything in our lives is right. We comes because we recognize that things are wrong, really wrong in my life, and the world. That we’ve got real trouble: fears and anxieties, troubled consciences heavy with the knowledge of our own sin, trouble in our relationships with one another, trouble in our marriages and our families. In fact, if anybody’s got trouble, we’d be the first to throw up our hands and say, “that’s me!”

And that’s why we’re here! That’s why you’re sitting in the pew and I’m standing in the pulpit. Together we recognize we’re in the valley of the shadow, and we need our Savior’s voice. We’re desperate for it, for Jesus to speak to us words of comfort and encouragement, words of Gospel. Because we know that’s the only thing that can sustain me in this valley of the shadow—his rod, and his staff—that is, his Word, to comfort us with his promises, else we’d be lost forever.

That’s why Christ is here. To speak to us, that together in the house of God, we may hear our shepherd’s voice. And this is what he says to you, today: “I am the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep. Every other shepherd sees the wolf coming and flees, because he is a hireling, and loves his own life more than the sheep. But I lay down my life for you. Because I love you more than life itself. I am the Good Shepherd. And by Baptism, you belong to me. You are mine. I know you, as one of my own. I’ve defeated the wolf for you the cross. And though you face many dangers all around, I will never let a single one of them snatch you from my hand. By the rod and staff of my Word, ever guiding you, I am taking you to the green pastures and the quiet waters of eternal life. And there, you will dwell in my house forever. I am the Good Shepherd. And you are my sheep. And you have nothing to fear.”

Christ is risen. [**He is risen indeed. Alleluia**.] Amen.