

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2020

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

The Sheep's Life

John 10:1–10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

In the last verse from today's Gospel reading, Jesus said: **"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"** (John 10:10).

For a couple of summers my siblings and I raised sheep for 4-H. Being a sheep looked easy. Eat grass, roam around, eat more grass. Give them a good pasture and they're set. Of course, being a sheep has its downsides. Sheep can be mean and stubborn. They tend to wander. Sometimes they get lost or into dangerous situations. They aren't known for self-defense or intelligence. Some breeds have horns. None of claws or fierce teeth. We consider them prey, not predators.

The thing about sheep is that they're pretty simple creatures.

Now sheep may have a simple life, but the same can't be said for the shepherd. Those simple sheep need the watchful eye and care of another. That's the shepherd's job. He keeps track of, provides for, and protects his sheep. It's a tough life spent mostly with sheep and other shepherds for company.

In biblical times, they didn't own private fields or have barns for their flocks. Instead, the shepherd would lead his sheep out to pasture in the open country during the day and then bring them into a sheepfold at night for safety. Sheepfolds were enclosed spaces often formed by rock walls. Caves sometimes served the purpose, too. A single entrance helped keep the sheepfold secure from nighttime predators and enemies. The Gospel reading even mentions a "gatekeeper" —perhaps a watchman or one of the shepherds whose job was to guard the entrance. He even slept in front of the opening so that nothing could enter or leave the sheepfold without waking him.

Whether they know it or not, sheep are dependent creatures. Their lives depend on having a shepherd who cares for them.

Believers in Jesus are called sheep. Not lions or bears or eagles but sheep. That's what we hear in John 10. The readings on Good Shepherd Sunday herd us together and pen us in. They force us to come face-to-face with the reality of who we are: whether old or young, rich or poor, male or female, we're all sheep and we've got a sheep's life. We're that simple, and that mean and stubborn and prone to wander and defenseless. Unflattering but true. As sheep, our lives don't depend on ourselves. We depend on the Lord.

Besides the shepherd, however, Scripture mentions a thief, a robber, and a stranger. Jesus said, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who doesn't enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens"** (vv 1–3). There are two main differences between the shepherd and the others. The first difference is that the thief and robber gain access to the sheep unlawfully. The shepherd, on the other hand, has the right and the privilege of being with his flock and caring for it. He enters by the normal way.

Jesus continued, **"The sheep hear [the shepherd's] voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers"** (vv 3–5). The second difference is the bond between the shepherd and sheep. The sheep know the shepherd's voice and the shepherd knows his sheep by name. The sheep trust their shepherd. The shepherd leads. The sheep listen and follow.

Jesus is the true shepherd. When He looks out at humanity, at you, He has compassion, **"because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd"** (Mt 9:36). Those who were supposed to be care for the flock had failed. The Pharisees and scribes were nothing but thieves and robbers. They did spiritual harm to the sheep. What was true back then remains true today. False teachers are robbers and thieves who threaten the life of the sheep. Jesus seeks the well-being of the flock, its protection and safety. He is the true shepherd.

Jesus proved this by suffering for the flock. St. Peter said of Him: **"He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. When He was reviled, He didn't revile in return; when He suffered, He didn't threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls"** (1 Pet 2:22–25). He did what no one else could do or would do for the

sheep. He knows their sin, their suffering, their sicknesses, and their sorrow. He Himself shared them and bore them. He shows His worth as a shepherd. He has given His life for the sheep. And so He has earned the right to care for them, to **“be their shepherd and carry them forever”** (Ps 28:9). And you are His sheep.

What Jesus does as shepherd gives life to us sheep and protects us. If we lose Him or wander from Him, then we lose the life and pasture that He gives us. And what’s most important for the flock is the shepherd’s voice. We know Him by His Word. If we stop listening to His voice, we will be led astray and get lost. We’ll lose the green pastures and the safety of His sheepfold. So do we recognize Jesus’ voice and can we tell it apart from the thieves and robbers that would do us harm? Do we know His Word, pay attention to it, and study it? Do we see that Jesus the Shepherd cares for the flock by the Word in all its forms—in preaching, through baptism, absolution, and Holy Communion?

Jesus also calls Himself the door: **“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly”** (vv 7–10). When sin, death, and the devil threatened us, Jesus lay down in the entrance of the sheepfold and said, “Over My dead body!” He meant it. And when they tried to climb over His dead body to get to us, He rose from the dead! Wakened from death, He is our shepherd still, and He will shepherd us through coronavirus, even through death, and then into His house forever. In Him, we are secure. Eternal, abundant life belongs to Him, and He gives it to us! He has been through the valley of the shadow of death.

So, dear sheep, our life really is simple. It has everything to do with the Shepherd and His Word. We eat—feeding on His Word and Sacraments—and live, and eat, and live. For the Shepherd Himself, by His life and death, makes it simple for us. He speaks. We listen. He leads. We follow. We have life, the sheep’s life forever through Jesus our Shepherd and within His sheepfold.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7

Revised from a sermon preached at St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on May 11, 2014.