

Easter 4 5/12/19
John 10:22-30 C

“MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE, AND I KNOW THEM, AND THEY FOLLOW ME.”

When Alexander Graham Bell spoke those famous words, “Mr. Watson, come here, I want to see you,” he didn’t have to tell his assistant who was speaking. Even though it was the first successful phone call in history, Mr. Watson immediately recognized Bell’s voice. You know how that is – the phone rings, you answer it, and the person on the other end does not have to identify himself or herself, because you recognize their voice. That voice is very distinctive, especially when it is a loved one, like a child or grandchild, calling to wish you a Happy Mother’s Day.

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me,” Jesus says (v. 27). On Good Shepherd Sunday, we are reminded that we are the sheep of the Good Shepherd’s pasture. We hear His voice, recognize it and follow Him.

I. And yet, when we look at our hearts and lives, we must admit there are times when we have no use of the voice of our Good Shepherd.

Sin justifies itself. You’ve heard the Sodom and Gomorrah argument, “Everyone else is doing it!” In Sodom and Gomorrah, it was true -- everyone was doing it and that’s was everyone was destroyed, with the exception of course, of righteous Lot and his family who weren’t going along with the crowd.

And yet, how often we fall for the Sodom and Gomorrah argument! We are much more concerned with what the crowd says and thinks than what God says and thinks.

Our words are words of profanity because that's how everyone talks around us, so we think if we are to be heard, we have to talk like they do. Instead of loving and cherishing our parents, forgiving them of their failings, we blame them for everything we think is wrong in our lives because that's what the world tells us to do. If someone ticks us off, its perfectly ok to hate them and harbor resentment, waiting until that day and time "they get theirs," because that's they way of the world. When we huddled with a few co-workers or over the coffee table, we gossip, not merely to make our neighbor look really bad, but because it makes us poplar, part of the crowd. We see marriage as a curse, because that's how the world sees it.

Sinful people are easy prey. There is one interesting fact about sheep -- they have no natural defenses. They cannot run fast. They are not huge, furious beasts which scare away predators. They do not have huge claws and sharp teeth to defend themselves. They do not have great strength. They are simply helpless.

If you saw a sheep and a wolf, or a lamb and a lion, in a cage together, what would you think? I don't want to endorse gambling, but I'm betting on the wolf and the lion every time. It wouldn't be good for the lamb. In all likelihood, the lamb would not even know that it was in trouble.

The Bible often pictures us as sheep and, Dear Friends in Christ, that is not a complement. It is not flattering to be compared to a lamb. Sheep must be defended. Like sheep, we have no defenses from sin and the death it brings. We are helpless. We must be defended from sin, death, and the devil.

II. The Good News for us sheep is that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep

Our Good Shepherd traded places with His lambs. But, He did not become just any lamb, He became the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. That means all the times you had no use for the voice of Jesus, all those times you listened to the lies of Satan, all those times you allowed the world to squeeze you into its mold, all your sins were laid on Jesus the Lamb and He carried it all to the cross. Nailed to the wooden rod of torture, "It is finished," He cried (Jn 19:30). That is the voice of our Shepherd, dying for our sin, dying for the wages of His sheep's sin. Sin took the lifeblood of the Lamb, so that we would be forgiven and death would pass over us.

His resurrection the 3rd day has opened the kingdom of heaven to us. That means one day we will be "before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple...hunger no more, neither thirst anymore...[and] God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes (Rev. 7:15-17)."

III. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me," Jesus says (v. 27). The Bible pictures Jesus as our Good Shepherd, us as the sheep of His pasture, and the Church as the Good Shepherd's flock. Maybe we should look at Jesus' words this way: What makes you a member of the church?

The Jews who came to Jesus had some very definite ideas of what made them members of the Church. They thought their human ancestry -- remember their boast, "We have Abraham as our father" -- made them a member of the church, and hence a child of God and an heir of heaven (cf. Matthew 3:9). They are upset, downright angry, because Jesus told them "no," they were not members of the church. And, He tells them why: "You do not believe because you are not part of My flock (v. 26)." Like these

Jews who do not believe, some have no use at all for the voice of the Good Shepherd Jesus.

If you asked Lutherans what makes you a member of the Church, most would probably say something like being confirmed or having your name on a membership list. We have to be very clear on this to avoid misunderstanding – being confirmed and being on the membership list of a congregation are most certainly fruits of faith, but it is a mistake error to think that merely the fact of being confirmed or having your name on a membership list are going to get you into heaven.

What makes you a member of the church? Faith makes you a member the church, the Good Shepherd's flock. Where does faith come from? Faith is not something you do. Faith is not a decision you make. Faith is God's work in you. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ," St. Paul writes (Ro 10:17). What makes you a member of the Church? Hearing the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Martin Luther said it this way, "A seven year-old-child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd." That voice of your Shepherd gives you faith, so that you recognize, hear, and follow your Shepherd.

And, that is vital because we walk by faith through this valley of the shadow of death, not by sight. As helpless, defenseless sheep, we are beset by cancer, the loneliness of losing a loved one, financial pressure, children that break our hearts, and the list goes on and on. "Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?," the hymnwriter asked (*LSB* 770:2). And, we – each and everyone of us – would answer, "yes," as a matter of fact we do feel like sheep under attack by a vicious wolf.

Sheep, for all of their faults have one very admirable quality -- the instantly recognize the voice of their Shepherd. The Lord is our Shepherd and we hear His voice – “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved (Mk 16:16)” ... “Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven (Mt 9:2)” ... “Take, eat; this is my body...Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Mt 26:26-27)” ... “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also (Jn 14:3)” ... “I am with you always (Mt 28:20).” “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand (Jn 10:28-29).” That is your Shepherd’s voice and that is His promise to you this very day! That is the voice that comforts us, strengthens us, and casts out all fear.

In his morning and evening prayer, Martin Luther teaches us to pray, “For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things.” We commend ourselves into the hands and no one and nothing -- not the tears and troubles of today, not the devil, not even death can take us from our Shepherd’s hands. In those hands, we are bold to say, “I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever (Ps 23:6)!”