

Jesus Knows His Sheep (And We Know Him)

King of Glory Lutheran Church

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Year C: 4 Easter: John 10: 22-30

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²²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." ²⁵Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one."

They won't believe because they haven't experienced Jesus. The sheep know the living Jesus and He knows them. The promise is real, Jesus' sheep will never be taken away from God.

God's grace and peace and love and enduring embrace is upon us all this day.
Amen.

Each year on the 4th Sunday after Easter we hear a text about Jesus the Good Shepherd. Thus we read Psalm 23, which is near and dear to many of us as we memorized it as youngsters.

Did anyone else get twitchy hearing this Gospel text? I did. Frankly, verse 25 gives me the heebie jeebies. That is a theological term, by the way. Jesus says, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep."

Because these words were written to a faithful community, let's take some time in this faithful community to understand what is going on behind the words on the page. In John's Gospel, there is a running theme about who believes and who doesn't believe in Jesus. Remember Nicodemus? He comes at night to Jesus. "We know you are a teacher who comes from God, for no one can do these signs you do apart from God." Jesus replies, "You must be born anew.....If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

Jesus now claims to be the Good Shepherd. We also know that God is the Shepherd of ancient Israel in the Old Testament. In Jesus' claim He is the Shepherd, people hear a claim of divinity. Still others begin to say Jesus is demonic.

There is an intense controversy brewing between the Christian community and the Jews who do not believe in Jesus; both the religious authorities and lay people. Thus, we hear that tension in Jesus' words. In addition, Jesus is walking in Solomon's portico – a place where Israel's kings used to pronounce judgements. This lends an air of grandiose importance to His words.

“But you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.” It sounds as if, Jesus is saying, the issue is out of your hands. One cannot control the fact one doesn't believe. And as if, there are others who do believe, and they are lucky to be in the flock.

If it gives you comfort, theologians have argued Jesus' statements for centuries. The issue at hand is how humans come to believe in God. People who follow John Calvin say God predestined all believers to believe in God, for all time, before time ever began. People who followed Pelagius and Arminius acknowledge God's grace but leave more room for human will and our decision for salvation. But if that's the case, how can we ever be certain we are saved?

Luther on the other hand, called a thing a thing. He freely acknowledged human sin and God's grace. ‘Luther advocated neither predestination nor free will but rather talked about God's election. The difference, for Luther, was that election was not concerned with things God may or may not have done eons ago, but rather named a present-tense reality: God's immediate and ongoing decision to choose us, to love us, to save us. And whenever preachers proclaim God's promises, Luther believed, God once again arrives on the scene to elect people to abundant life.’
(<https://www.davidlose.net/2016/04/easter-4-c-the-electing-word/>)

Isn't this what shepherds do? They make immediate and ongoing decisions to choose the sheep, love the sheep, and save the sheep. They sleep in the pen's gate so to as attack an intruder first. Shepherds know each sheep intimately: each sheep's face, coloring, and personalities. The ones who are content to stay with the flock and the sheep who might tend to stray. This might sound impossible but its true.

Shepherds know their sheep. Likewise, sheep know the shepherd. Still today, a shepherd can call out in front of a huge group of sheep, and only that particular shepherd's flock will begin to move towards the shepherd.

We too, know God. We know God from God's presence in our lives. From God's comfort and guidance. We experience God's creation coming to life in spring bulbs. God shows up in a loving friend to offer care joyous laughter. For God our Good Shepherd elects to keep on believing in us by choosing us, loving us and saving us.

If this is what God the Shepherd does and who God the Shepherd is, then perhaps another take on verse 25 and following might be helpful.

Can you remember a time when a friend came to you and began describing the most amazing, fantastic movie that, "you simply have to go see!" They tell you the plot line, the Hollywood actors and actresses, the fabulous cinematography and all the details they absolutely loved about a movie.

You listen with interest, or patience. But you cannot get caught up in their enthusiasm because you have not seen the movie. You weren't in the theater. You didn't see the cinematography. You couldn't feel the roar of the speakers under your seat when the music crescendoed.

Imagine Jesus saying to the Jews who are trying to get Him to say He is the Messiah, imagine Jesus saying, "You didn't see the movie."

Jesus says, "I have told you, and you do not believe (that I am the Messiah). The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me." (vs 25)

Do you remember when John the Baptist is sitting in prison and he sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one? Are you the Messiah?" The response from Jesus is, "The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Mt 11:4-5)

In other words, "my actions speak for themselves." When Jesus is talking with these Jews who are wondering about His identity, His response is, "my actions speak for themselves. I could talk all day to you about this, but you haven't experienced me or what I can do."

We – this community – knows the Good Shepherd. We hear Him when we attend a funeral. We sing His praises joyfully on festival Sundays like Easter. We love Him again and again when we eat His bread and drink the wine of forgiveness. We – all of us – have experienced Jesus and what He alone can do. At the end of the day, the theological arguments don't matter for most of us. For believing, faith and trust... are about an intimate, experiential relationship with a living God.

That, makes us certain of Jesus' promise at the end of the text. "No one and no thing will ever snatch you out of my or the Father's hand."

Perhaps this is the only thing we need to hear today.

Jesus the good Shepherd, promises us that there is ultimate certainty of God's protection of each of us and this community. We are the beloved flock.

Whatever we are going through today, that does not keep the Shepherd away. We might be fearful of something to come or something in our past. It could be the breakdown or breakup of a relationship. We ask what will happen to Ukraine and Afghanistan? Will I get another job with my past work history? Will my children ever go to church? Jesus' words to us are this: nothing and no one can take us out of God's hand. We are held forever.

Amen!