

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Sermon Reflection Notes

Pastor Ron told the story of taking then two-year-old Isaac to see the new lambs at a parishioner's farm at his first appointment in Appleton City. While there, the farmer asked them to get the sheep from one fenced area to another so that he could feed them. Pastor Ron said he tried, really hard, but no matter what he did, the sheep wouldn't budge. The farmer walked over, gave a loud yap, and in one simultaneous motion every sheep's head popped up, looked at him, and then they walked in a single file line to get their food. They knew the shepherd's voice; they trusted him and knew he was the guy who fed them, cared for them; they knew him.

This is a real-life example of the scripture reading from this week. Jesus said: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me." Even Mary, on Easter morning, didn't recognize Jesus with her eyes; it was only after Jesus said her name, that she recognized her shepherd's voice and knew the man before her was the one she trusted, the one she followed.

The scripture from John 10:22-30 is yet another example of religious antagonists asking Jesus to tell them plainly...are you the Messiah or not? And Jesus' answer is so good. He doesn't fall into their trap and offer an explicit yes or no. Instead, he said to them "Look, I've given you all the information you need. Look at what I do. See the work I have done. Hear what I teach." And then he brought in the sheep/shepherd metaphor again. He said the sheep who believe hear my voice, they know it, they follow me, and I protect them from the idols that distort true love of God and neighbor. In fact, Jesus said, "I give them eternal life."

Jesus protects his followers from outside idols, but maybe it's not idols like Zeus or golden statues. Perhaps the idols that tempted Jesus' ancient followers are the same idols that appeal to us. We sometimes idolize political ideology and identity; we idolize influence or wealth or notoriety. We even idolize the feeling of being right. We don't always intend to stray from the flock, but we do 'nibble ourselves lost.' We see a little grass here, and wander over to nibble, and then a little more a little further away. And before we know it, we're lost in a ravine.

Good Shepherds prevent such nibbling. Psalm 23 is a very familiar scripture, and one that speaks more of courage more than death really. It reminds us that when danger is around us, God is still there to guide, and provide, and protect, like a shepherd. And in the valley of the shadow of death, God prepares a meal. Not just any meal though—one in the presence of my enemies.' Which is the heart of what Christians are called to do. We are called to inhabit space with enemies. Not just to tolerate them, but to love them. God prepares a table, but it is not our table. It's God's table...it's Jesus' table. And as his sheep, we listen. We come to the table, all together, to eat, to share, to learn how to love.

Scripture

John 10:22-30 (NRSVUE)

At that time the Festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴ So 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."

²⁵ Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's

name testify to me ²⁶ but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, in regard to what he has given me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ The Father and I are one."

Discussion Questions

1. Sheep and Shepherds are images often used in our scriptures. Where are the places and stories in scripture that include shepherds and sheep?
2. Not that many of us are really familiar with raising sheep. However, being a shepherd is an enduring image of God. What does that image tell us about who God is?
3. When asked "Are you the Messiah?", Jesus did not answer directly, but rather he "told all the truth but told it slant" (Emily Dickenson). Jesus said: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life..." Pastor Ron deliberately pointed out that Jesus did not say "I *will* give eternal life." Instead, he used the present tense: "I give them eternal life." What does it mean then to have the eternal life Jesus gives?
4. Pastor Ron said: "I always think the most powerful idol of our day is our political ideology. I once heard a United Methodist Bishop say something like, 'it's a lot easier to find people whose political ideology influences their religious beliefs than it is to find someone whose religious beliefs influence their political ideology.'" Where have people stepped outside of the norm and allowed their religious beliefs to influence their political ideology?
5. Verse 1 in Psalm 23 says "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" but Pastor Ron said a better translation is not 'want' but "There is no good thing that I lack." He went on to say "The thing we lack is intimacy with God." What does 'intimacy with God' look like?
6. The voice of the Shepherd God calls us to a table in the valley of the shadow of death—a table where wolves and lambs eat together, a table where enemies sit beside us to share the food God provides. How do we learn to trust the voice of that God who calls us to that table?

Closing Prayer

Holy God, we remember always that you are with us, you comfort us, you guide us through dangerous places, and you mark us with the waters of baptism. In Jesus, we know you to be the shepherd who gives his life so that we might have life. And so, our lives are caught up in the Easter power of Jesus so that we can do Easter for those who are in need. Give us courage for the journey of Easter faith. We pray in the name of Jesus, the Christ, your presence with us. Amen.

"As God's sheep, we follow the Shepherd's voice."