

John 10:22-30

Easter 4C + May 12, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Miracle Sheep

The Word of the Lord from John 10:27-28: Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand."

Dear hearers in Christ, He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

This is the fourth Sunday of Easter, traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday; and indeed, I'm given to understand that this parish receives its name from a service held on this Sunday of Easter many years ago. The shepherd/sheep theme runs throughout Scripture, and it is a great blessing that the Lord is our shepherd, that we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. After all, sheep are always endangered by predators, especially if they are prone to wandering. And we are.

Jesus is not wandering aimlessly in our text. He is walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. This is during the Feast of Dedication, which you know better as Hanukkah, and it's an important holiday. Between the Old and New Testaments and before the Romans, the Jews were ruled by the Seleucids, most notoriously by a ruler named Antiochus Epiphanes – "Antiochus, the Enlightened One." Antiochus had an agenda for Judea: he wanted to convert the Jews from their religion to Greek thought and philosophy. He did so with a heavy hand: to demonstrate his power and resolve, he desecrated the temple by having a pig slaughtered on the altar. Those caught practicing their religion – even merely circumcising infant sons – were put to death publicly and barbarically. Bear in mind, by the way, that this a couple of centuries before Christ: those whom Antiochus killed were those who trusted God's promise that the Savior was coming. They were your fellow believers, born on the other side of the Incarnation and now awaiting your arrival in heaven.

In the course of time, the Jews revolted. Their military savior was a man named Judas Maccabeus. Under his leadership, they overthrew the Seleucids and gained independence for a short time until the Romans arrived. Once the Seleucids were gone, they cleansed and rededicated the temple. That's what Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, is all about.

Antiochus Epiphanes left a mark. For one thing, he left a divided culture in Judea: there were those who were sympathetic to Greek philosophy and those who were opposed, and so we find the Sadducees and Pharisees, respectively. He also shaped the idea of the Messiah in the minds of the Judeans. Rather than believe the Messiah to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament, many began to believe that the Christ would be in the mold of Judas Maccabeus – another powerful fighter and liberator. In our text, now that they're ruled by the Romans, they're hoping for a formidable messiah who will overthrow Caesar.

As Jesus walks in the temple He is surrounded by an exasperated audience. They encircle Him and they demand, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Given the backstory of Hanukkah, their question makes sense. Jesus has certainly proven that He's powerful – if He can make demons flee with a word or two, then the Romans shouldn't be especially difficult to expel. However, Jesus hasn't done the sorts of things you'd expect a messiah to do: He's acting like a rabbi with disciples, not a general with troops. He's not gathering weapons, but feeding the poor. He's not giving rousing speeches telling people to prepare for war, but sermons telling them to repent ... and even pay taxes to Caesar.

It's not adding up, and they're tired of what they perceive to be an evasive game. They want a clear answer. Is Jesus their messiah – is He their next Judas Maccabeus?

Jesus begins by responding, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name bear witness about Me, but you do not believe because you are not among My sheep."

It is not that Jesus hasn't told them, but that He's not said what they want to hear. The requirements for *the* Messiah aren't their expectations, but God the Father's; and He has laid those down, quite clearly, throughout the Old Testament. Prophecies and types declare that, on the one hand, the Messiah will arrive with all sorts of power and might, and He will use that power to heal and deliver from evil; and, on the other hand, the same Messiah will save by suffering, by bearing the sins and infirmities of mankind and dying, then rising again. As Jesus goes about His public ministry, He's fulfilling prophecy after prophecy, type after type. With everything He says and does, He confirms that He is the Messiah.

He is not, however, the Messiah that they want. Why? Because they don't believe. They are not among His sheep, His followers who trust in Him. This is a far more basic problem than looking for the right guy to get rid of Caesar. The problem is that, without God's gift of faith, sinners don't believe His Word. Instead, because sinners so often have such a high opinion of themselves, they expect God to kowtow to their expectations, like a genie in a bottle. They expect God to be on a leash, to do things their way, according to their desires and appetites. They don't believe that God is any bigger than their imaginations.

It's as absurd as it is tragic: how terrible is it if the god you believe in is smaller than you are?

But that's the world all around you: as Jesus was surrounded by unbelievers in the temple, you're surrounded by an unbelieving world. You should never be surprised when the world around you finds your faith to be strange; because without faith, they're going to get God wrong.

On the one hand, there will be those who expect God to agree with them. Therefore, if they believe that the unborn are inhuman or they favor this or that ungodly behavior, they'll be convinced that God must agree with them. If they believe God's Word doesn't make sense or offends, then they'll be sure that God is grateful to submit to their edits. They simply believe that they are greater than the Maker of heaven and earth. This isn't just secularism at work: you'll find all sorts of *churches* that have forsaken the Word of God; and having forsaken the means by which the Spirit works faith, they no longer have faith – and so they simply parrot the doctrines of the world while claiming to be Christian. Politicians will promote all sorts of things that are contrary to Scripture, all the while claiming God's approval; but to be fair to the strategists, it's usually not a good move to run on the platform that Almighty God is voting against you.

On the other hand, there will be those who get God wrong by simply denying that He exists. The Lord, however, does not obligingly vanish just because people don't believe in Him.

Beware, because the trouble isn't just on the outside of you. As long as you've got a sinful nature, there's a part of you that's busy carving out a spot for your favorite sins and convincing yourself that God concurs with you. But if you carve out too much and do not repent, you will have no faith left and you will die in unbelief, even as you convince yourself that God is on your side.

By the way, this text serves as an important reminder during the Easter season. We continue to rejoice that Christ is risen from the dead; and Scripture itself says that, if Christ is not raised from the dead, your faith is in vain and you are the most pitiable of all. However, always keep in mind that, for the one who has no faith, your belief in the Resurrection ranks right up there with believing that the earth is flat or that this world is actually controlled by ducks. That doesn't mean we stop proclaiming the Resurrection: after all, people cannot believe unless they hear the Word of Christ crucified and risen

again. It does mean, however, that we shouldn't be surprised when the world considers the Gospel, *the core message of the Church*, to be useless, fantastical and irrelevant. It's not. Don't change the message. Just be prepared.

Be prepared and be thankful: because Jesus goes on in this passage to speak of you. He says, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand." God be praised for the miracle that He has worked in you. By the work of the Holy Spirit, He has called you by the Gospel and enlightened you with His gifts – gifts including faith so that you might believe the unbelievable. He has delivered you from the delusion that you are bigger than He is, and He has also blessed you with the faith that the all-powerful God – who is far bigger than you are – first and foremost exercises that power mercifully to save you. Christ, through whom all things were made, took on the flesh of mankind whom He created. He did so to bear your sins to the cross, to die your death and then to rise again. The Good Shepherd became the sacrificial Lamb whose blood was shed to redeem you.

Risen again, He pours out His Spirit as He sends forth His Word. In His Word, you hear His voice – and you believe! Despite the constant barrage of the world, despite your own sinful desires to bend God to fit your agenda, despite the devil's ongoing temptation to turn into yourself and stop listening, you believe. It's a miracle.

Believing, you define sin as God defines it and repent when you go against His Word.

Believing, you rejoice that you are forgiven because Christ bore your sins to the cross.

Believing, you confess that ridiculously joyful miracle that Christ is in fact risen from the dead, and so He has eternal life to give you.

Furthermore, you delight in this promise as you're pushed and pulled by threat and temptation: No one is able to snatch you out of His hand. Not only that, but He and the Father are one, and in complete agreement about your redemption: so if you are in the Son's hands, you are in the Father's hands too, and no one can snatch you out of the Father's hands. He will not, of course, force you to remain in the flock: you can still wander away to fall into a pit or be eaten by wolves. But no matter what trouble you might face in this life, it is not greater than God, for God is greater than all.

That God, that Lord is your shepherd. He has led you to the waters of your baptism. Now, hear His voice as He speaks His Word of absolution. Rejoice that He prepares a table before you in the presence of your enemies, feeding you His life-giving body and blood. By His grace, He gives you eternal life, and you will never perish; and no one can snatch you out of His hand.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen