

BELONGING TO CHRIST
JOHN 10: 22-30; PSALM 23
FOURTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME
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Psalm 23

1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff--they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Our gospel lesson also references the symbolism of sheep and their shepherd, only this time Jesus talks about his sheep in response to challenges from Jewish religious leaders. After Jesus shared the words you will hear, some of those who heard his voice prepared to stone him. Not everyone welcomes the Word of God. Listen to the Good News that brings life to those who listen and follow:

John 10: 22-30

22 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 What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. 30 The Father and I are one."

Thanks be to God for the reading of this Word. Please pray with me. God, our Savior and our shepherd, we give thanks for your call in Jesus Christ. We give thanks for your grace that enables us to hear the voice of Jesus and follow him by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thank you God, for being our shepherd and letting us rest in the knowledge that nothing can snatch your sheep away. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Our gospel passage occurs as opposition to Jesus intensified. The occasion was Hanukkah, a holiday still celebrated by Jews today. Hanukkah, or the feast of Dedication, commemorated the rededication of the Temple by the Maccabees in 164 BCE (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, 444-445). Antiochus IV desecrated the Temple three years earlier by erecting an image of Zeus. The Maccabees defeated the Syrians and restored the Temple. Jews during the life of Jesus expected a Messiah who would bring political victory and religious celebration. They had their paradigms for the God who would come—paradigms based on their understanding of King David and the Maccabees.

By placing the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees in the context of the Jewish festival, the Gospel of John raised the stakes. If Jesus was the Messiah, then the focus of religious life would change. The center would be Jesus Christ, not religious institutions or political power.

Some Christians have used this passage to denigrate Jews, apparently not recognizing that Jesus, the disciples and most of the first Christians were Jews. Christians may be more like the Pharisees than we

want to think. Perhaps we should look into our own institutional mirrors when we interpret this passage. Are we like the Pharisees? Do we resist the servant leadership of Christ and prefer to stay inside the walls of our church buildings? Do we focus so much on the structure, traditions and the organization of the church that we fail to hear Christ's voice and follow him? Have we become too comfortable?

In his recent book A New Kind of Christianity, Brian McLaren says "something isn't working in the way we're doing Christianity" (reviewed in The Christian Century, April 20, 2010, p. 17). McLaren believes Christianity was skewed by the Greek and Roman emphasis on what happens after death. McLaren wants Christians to give more attention to Christ's message about new life in the Kingdom of God right now. McLaren thinks Christianity was tainted by early Christian imperialism, beginning with Constantine and continuing in America today. Like the Pharisees Christians often appear more interested in power and control than in serving others in Christ's name.

Not long ago someone told me about a congregation who was arguing over whether to use plates or baskets to take up the offering. Christians expend a lot of energy pointing fingers at each other. We can learn something from the Pharisees. We need to listen more closely to Christ and then follow where he leads.

Jesus walked in the Temple portico as the Pharisees approached him with accusing words. "Don't keep us in suspense," they said. "If you are the Messiah, tell us." Jesus knew they would not believe him, no matter what he said. *I have told you, Jesus responded, and you do not believe.* Jesus then took a different tact. *The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me.*

The Pharisees wanted words. They wanted to argue scriptural interpretation and doctrine. They wanted talk, but Jesus gave action. He gave sight to the blind. He fed the hungry. He healed the sick. He enjoyed the company of his disciples, and he also enjoyed the company of sinners. Jesus reached out to people that others rejected. Jesus went after those who were lost.

If we follow Christ, we, too, will be known by what we do more than by what we say. Later in our worship service, we will welcome new members by affirming our faith together. Knowing what we believe is significant, but our actions speak louder than our words. We would do well to take St. Francis of Assisi's advice and "preach the gospel always and when necessary use words" (Lectionary Homiletics, April 29, 2007, 43).

St. Augustine believed the problem with the Pharisees was that they did not desire to hear the truth (Lectionary Homiletics, April 29, 2007, 44). They simply wanted a basis to accuse Jesus of blasphemy. *You do not believe, Jesus said to the Pharisees. 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.*

John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian tradition, contended that it was the Pharisees' fault that they did not hear the truth in what Jesus said and did (Lectionary Homiletics, April 29, 2007, 44). They were willful and obstinate. They cared most about their own status and success. They did not want to be the sheep of a God like Jesus. They wanted a powerful king, not a man who laid down his life for sinners.

Some people do not hear Christ's voice or follow him today for the same reasons. If we follow Jesus, we may not be popular or successful. We may not climb as high on the corporate ladder or make as much money. We may not join the select sports team that plays in tournaments on Sundays. Did you know that the NCAA is now scouting middle schoolers? (National Public Radio, April 24, 2010). Bruce Webber, basketball coach for the University of Illinois said they begin watching kids who come to their camps as

early as the 4th and 5th grades. He is not pleased with the system, but it is the system and the society we have.

The pressures to do and be all you can be by society's standards are tremendous. If we listen to Christ and follow him, we may say no to a job, a position or a recreational activity that consistently keeps us from church. Following Jesus may mean we go in a direction others do not like. We may be rejected.

Judging from the experience of the Pharisees, the voice of Jesus may contradict the status quo and business as usual. Like the Pharisees, we may prefer things as they are. God is always doing something new. If we listen to Jesus and follow, we may do something new, too. Most of us resist change. Are we listening or have we tuned God out?

Some people do not hear the voice of Jesus because they are focused on something else. Some people follow shepherds of self-interest, success, wealth, power, popularity or addictions. Like the Pharisees, we may have our own understanding and our own agendas.

The Pharisees thought they knew what the scriptures said. They believed they knew more about God than Jesus did. Their self-righteousness got in the way of the Lord they thought they were following. It happens all the time. The results can be tragic. One priest, Father Martin, observed that the sexual abuse by priests was not primarily the result of homosexuality or celibacy (National Public Radio, April 24, 2010). He blamed the abuse on the sense of entitlement and privilege among priests who forgot their call to serve the least of these.

This week I will call a friend who serves as pastor of Hyde Park Christian Church in Austin. Jacqueline was so excited about the passion for mission in her church. The former chair of the church committee that dispensed grants to local charities was the woman who fled to Venezuela after stealing thousands of dollars from the Austin non-profit Family Connection. How do we deal with abuse, betrayal and fraud?

Earlier in Chapter Ten of the Gospel of John, Jesus talked about thieves who steal, kill and destroy. He spoke of hired hands who do not care and leave sheep vulnerable to attack. Some of us have experienced this first hand. There is a lot of pain in the world. Some of the pain is caused by other Christians. Some of the pain is caused by our own sin.

The Good News is that Jesus is our Shepherd. We are here this morning because we have heard his voice. God in Jesus Christ gave his life for us, for sinners and for lost sheep. The Good News is that once we have heard Jesus and followed him, Jesus said no one can snatch us out of his hand. This is comforting because we *are* like sheep. We go astray. People we love get lost.

The Good News is that God provides for us. God restores us. God leads us to green pastures and still waters in this life and in the life to come. God's grace protects us like oil protected the sheep. God is with us when we move through darkness. God lays blessings before us even when we are in the midst of enemies. We do not need to be afraid. *I give them eternal life, Jesus said, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. 30 The Father and I are one.*

Jesus is our shepherd. If we hear Christ's voice and follow, there is more. We are called to love and care for others as Jesus loves and cares for us. My friends, we are blessed to be a blessing. If we follow Jesus this week, we may bring the voice of Christ to someone for the first time. We may reach someone who once heard Christ but now follows strangers, thieves and hired hands.

Over 70 percent of the people in this community do not have a church home. Most of the kids at school do not have a church home. They do not experience the love you give and receive in Christ's name. They do not know what they are missing.

Presbyterians believe Christ calls us into a community of faith to be the body of Christ in a particular time and place. We are both sheep and shepherds of Christ's flock. Today we welcome new members, new sheep and shepherds who join us in listening to the voice of Christ and following him the best we can. As they come forward, let us sing our commitment to serve them and to serve Christ.