

Easter 4 C 2010
Good Shepherd Sunday
Texts: Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7: 9-17
John 10: 22-30

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me...No one will snatch them out of my hand.” John 10: 27-28

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter. That can only mean one thing-it is Good Shepherd Sunday. No matter the liturgical year, A, B, and C all have gospel readings from the tenth chapter of John and all are about the Good Shepherd. And in all three years of our lectionary cycle the Psalm for this Sunday is always Psalm 23.

In year A we hear about the coming of the Good Shepherd and how it is the Good Shepherd that protects the sheep. It is the Good Shepherd that both becomes the way and shows the way out of the sheep pen to the sheep.

In year B Jesus talks about how the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Others will run away in the face of evil and danger, but the Good Shepherd faces it squarely, even to the point of death, so that the flock may be saved.

We are currently in year C and we are told that Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Dedication festival. This is the festival we know as Hanukkah. It was the time to celebrate the taking back and rededication of Israel’s holiest site, the Temple. The Temple had been taken over by Antiochus IV, who called himself Antiochus Epiphanies, which means, “manifest God.”

Antiochus was so taken with himself that he entered the Temple and put pagan images in it. But the worst part was that sacrifices to Zeus were made on its altar thereby desecrating it. The Maccabees fought back and in 164 B.C. retook the Temple and rededicated it to God. That is what the word “Hanukkah” means, dedication. The feast of the

Dedication celebrated the rededication of the Temple and served as an example of rededicating one's life to the one true God.

Jesus is walking in the portico and is being challenged by the religious leaders of his day. Here is another man, claiming to be God. The last one that showed up claiming he was God desecrated the place. You can really understand how upsetting this is to them. They lost the Temple once to a guy who thought he was god, was Jesus another one of those that would profane the Temple?

The leaders ask Jesus "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." The word that is translated as suspense really means to annoy. What they want to know is how much longer he is going to be around annoying and antagonizing them. This man is a real pain and they want nothing more than for him to go away.

Jesus tells them that he has told them that he is the Messiah but that they have chosen not to believe him. Yet all his works prove to those who have faith that he is who he says he is. He also tells them that in order to believe they must belong to his flock and they don't. To be part of Jesus' flock is to recognize his voice and to follow him. Then Jesus commits the unforgivable blasphemy. He tells them that he and God are one.

Immediately after he says this, in the verses of the gospel that aren't read today, the leaders pick up stones and prepare to kill him.

The Gospel of John was written by a Jewish Christian for a Jewish Christian community that was in deep conflict, not so much externally as internally. Here were faithful Jews being persecuted by other faithful Jews. The followers of Jesus were possibly being put out of the synagogue. I think it is fair to say that this was a hard, painful time for all involved.

To be a sheep of the Good Shepherd means to belong, belong to a community that is deep and rich and that lives in the heart and protection of God.

"My sheep hear my voice and they follow me." Each shepherd has his own distinct call that the sheep can tell is their master's. As soon as

they hear it they know they are to stop what they are doing and turn to their master and follow him and only him.

Have any of you ever been lost? Really, really lost?

Have you ever responded to a false voice? I have and to this day when I think about this event I get a clutch in my stomach and can remember every detail of that horrible moment.

When I was a little girl my Mother would take each of us shopping once a year or so. We would take the bus to downtown Newark and shop at Haynes or Lord and Taylor. It was always very exciting and I always looked forward to it.

One time, I couldn't have been more than seven, we had finished our shopping and were standing outside under the overhang of the front doors of Haynes Department store. To this day, I swear I heard my mother calling me. I followed the voice only I couldn't find her.

By this time I was in the middle of the sidewalk with no sight of my mother at all. All of a sudden I turned around and what seemed like thousands of people were coming towards me. It seemed like all the buildings had let all of their occupants out at the same time. That is when the panic set in; a deep, growling, scream rising in your throat panic. I don't think I have ever been so terrified.

Then I heard it, my real mother's voice and somehow I got back to her. I was never so glad to see my mother in my young life. This whole event probably only lasted a minute or so, but it seemed and still seems like it lasted hours.

This probably explains that what I hate most is not knowing where the boys are, or not knowing where I am going. I am never so stressed out as then. I've been known to really lose it when I am in one or the other of these situations.

Remembering this situation made me ask the questions, "so, when do we know that the voice we hear is the voice of Jesus and not some false voice?" "When do we know that the way and the one we are following is truly the Good Shepherd?"

In order to answer those questions I want to tell you another lost story because in this story lies some wisdom for us.

Deborah Smith Douglas is an Episcopal laywoman. She had flown into Kansas City for a meeting and for some time with friends. She rented a car at the Kansas City airport and very quickly looked at a map as to where she was supposed to meet up these people. She had never been in Kansas City before and she had arrived during rush hour.

She didn't pay much attention to the map and it didn't take her long to get completely lost. She found herself off the interstate and in an area of abandoned buildings, dark warehouses and no people. Off in the distance she saw a sign for a 24 hour coffee shop.

She was thrilled to be among civilization once more and she goes into the shop to finally ask directions to the hotel she was staying at. Unfortunately the woman at the counter had no idea where this hotel was. She writes, "On a rising tide of panic, I began to fear as one does in a nightmare, that I would be lost forever."¹

A homeless man approaches her. He looked like he had had a rough life. Teeth were missing, he was dressed in rags but his eyes were kind. He asked if he could help her and she told him that she was lost. He knew where she was and he knew where she was going.

"You're just off of Broadway here," the man told her. "You can be on it in a minute. Once you get on that road, you just stay on it." He took her map that had been crumbled up in frustration and traced her way on it with his dirty finger. "the name of the street will change, but don't you mind that. You'll come to train tracks by the river, and it will be confusing, but don't mind that either. You just keep going forward. You'll come to a bridge. Go over it. Stay on that street. After a while, you'll see signs for downtown. Then pretty soon you'll see the name of the street you want, and you'll turn left. But until then you just keep going on the road you're on."

¹ Deborah Smith Douglas. *Weaving: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*. Vol. XXV, #3 p. 15

“Do you mean,” Deborah asks “that all I have to do is get on Broadway at the next corner and then just go straight to my hotel?”

“No, ma’am” he corrected her very firmly. “It ain’t straight at all. Ain’t nothin’ straight about it. But you just keep going forward, and you’ll get there all right.”

When we follow the Good Shepherd’s voice we will keep moving forward. We are promised that we will be led and led through the dark and dangerous spots of our journey together. When we hear the Good Shepherd’s voice we realize that we have a Shepherd that will not let anything at all snatch us away from him. We know that we are protected and that our very lives are in God’s hands.

The other thing we may find out when listening for Jesus’ voice is that the way we thought we were to go is not straight at all. But when we allow ourselves to be led it need not be, because we know that with Jesus as our guide and guardian we will get to where we were meant to be. We know that despite evil and death, despite everything that the world throws at us, God’s will for us will prevail.

Deborah realized that she was lost and it wasn’t until she asked for help was she able to get on the right road again. It is only when we admit to being lost that we can begin to find our way again. “Jesus didn’t map out a way-he said “I am the Way.”² When we follow Jesus we are assured of being on the right road.

When we hear Jesus’ voice and we follow we are also given what one writer calls “the gift of unlikely confidence.”³ This means that when we are on the right road we will be given the courage to stay on the right path even though “the way of the Lord, it seems, is a path that runs straight through the heart of fear.”

Going forward. Letting ourselves be led. Asking for help when we realize that we don’t know where we are. Having courage through our

² Marilyn McEntyre. *Ibid.* p. 43

³ *ibid* p. 44

fears. All of these things will get us to where God wants us to be, and we will get there all right.