

The Word of God we'll focus on today is our Gospel reading from John chapter 10. Let's begin with prayer:

*Lord, my Shepherd, take me to Thee.  
Thou art mine;  
I was Thine,  
Even ere I knew Thee.  
I am Thine, for Thou hast bought me;  
Lost I stood,  
But Thy blood  
Free salvation brought me. Amen.  
(Paul Gerhardt)*

When I was a kid, I went to summer camp at a place called Camp Phillip in Wautoma, Wisconsin. It's a camp for WELS families and I remember learning a song there when I was a kid called "I just wanna be a sheep." It has lots of fun and silly verses like "I don't wanna be a Pharisee... cause they're not fair you see..." or "I don't wanna be a Sadducee, cause they're so sad you see...", but the main message is always brought home by the refrain: "I just wanna be a sheep."

And whether it's a fun camp song like that, or another song we learned as children like "I am Jesus Little Lamb", or simply one of the dozens of hymn versions of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm (which we've already sung and will sing some more shortly)... we have a habit as Christians of putting our relationship with the Good Shepherd into song. And that's because the picture of Shepherd and sheep is one we see often in the Bible to describe God and his people.

And this picture is very appropriate because we act a lot like sheep at times. Sheep are always hungry... not very smart... and find themselves in danger whenever they stray from the shepherd and the rest of the flock. And yet there's really only one point of comparison between us and sheep that Jesus focuses on in our sermon text today. And it's one worth remembering for all of Jesus' little lambs... all of us who just wanna be a sheep. And it's this: Sheep know their Shepherd. And the Shepherd knows his sheep. And because Jesus is your Shepherd you know you will always be loved and you will always be safe.

Now when Jesus spoke the words of our sermon text they followed a pretty remarkable scene in the Gospel of John. Jesus had given sight to a man born blind. This man had then been interrogated, along with his parents, by the local religious leaders, the Pharisees. Ultimately this man who had been healed was thrown out of the church – out of the synagogue – for speaking well of Jesus.

Perhaps you can understand then why Jesus begins his next speech the way he does... as he puts the Pharisees and false teachers of God's people on notice. He says: **"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.** Someone who creeps into a sheep pen is obviously not the shepherd, but someone who is there to harm the sheep. Perhaps to steal them and then sell them or kill them. The shepherd of course is the opposite. Jesus said: **The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.**

The shepherd has no reason to sneak into his sheep pen. He goes in by the gate. The sheep know him. They know him by his voice. And he knows his sheep. He recognizes each of them because he is a good shepherd who cares for these animals and has even called them all by a name. They follow this man. They know his track record with them. They know he loves them and will keep them safe.

And the sheep will never follow another like they follow their shepherd. Jesus said: **But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.** Now of course Jesus was not simply giving lessons in livestock here. He was teaching a spiritual truth. But for those false teachers who were trying to steal away Jesus' little lambs and sheep this truth was completely lost on them. John writes: **Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.** Clearly, they were not his sheep.

And so, Jesus speaks the truth again in another way: **"I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.**

You see Jesus is not only the Good Shepherd for his sheep, he is the gate for them as well. The Shepherd at the Gate leads and feeds and cares for his sheep and is the only way for them to enter into the safety of the sheep fold. What an awesome picture of Jesus! We see his love for his people so clearly. And we see also his protection for the flock on display.

So, what is our takeaway today? Well... let's consider a few things, shall we? First off think about the thieves and robbers in your life that are trying to lead you away... steal you away from Jesus and his sheep fold. Are you ever tempted to listen to the voices of false teachers on T.V. or from other churches that seem to have it all figured out? Maybe they tell you if you just give them some money, you'll be rich too... or if you just pray hard enough the cancer will go away... or if you just live more like Jesus you'll start seeing a better life... better relationships... better finances... better health... a better you. But where is Jesus in all of that? Are they telling you what the Bible says? That Jesus is the only way to heaven? That he is the gate for the sheep? That faith in Jesus means a cross and many trials here on earth... and that only in heaven will come the glory that God promises? Be careful that you are not seduced by such false shepherds.

Or maybe the false shepherds you hear try to rob you of comfort when it comes to your forgiveness. Do you hear other supposed Christians telling you that you can only be forgiven if you clean up your act first? Do you hear people saying that you must earn your own way... be your own way (your own gate) into heaven? Is that the voice of your Good Shepherd? No. Anyone who does not point to Jesus as the only Gate for the sheep is a thief and robber.

But even if such false teachers do not tempt you, there is yet another enemy to beware. You and I have a sinful nature that seeks to turn salvation into a do-it-yourself project. You pick out the way to be saved and you put in the work. If you sin, you do something to make up for it. If you mess up big, you take comfort that you're not as bad as your neighbor. If you rebel against God's commands today, it's no big deal because you can try harder tomorrow. Does that sound like the voice of your Good Shepherd? No. When your sinful heart tries to point you to your own worth... tries to compare you to others... tries to ignore God's Word just for today... you know that is the voice of the enemy who wants to destroy you speaking through your sinful flesh.

In Romans chapter 8 St. Paul reminds us of how our enemies view us... how Satan, this sinful world, and our own sinful flesh see each of us: **We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered** Paul says.

But today in the midst of all these voices trying to steal us from God... trying to rob us of peace and forgiveness... trying to destroy our faith and hope in the Lord... in the midst of it all comes this beautiful voice from our beautiful Savior. Our Good Shepherd Jesus calls to us... by name... he invites us to follow him through The Gate... through him. Jesus calls to us with that voice we know and reminds us all of what he's done for his flock. As Jesus tells us through one of his disciples in 1 Peter chapter 2: **[Jesus] bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but**

**now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.** Yes, Jesus died for us. For all our sins. All our wandering. All the times we've listened to the thief and robber. The Shepherd became the innocent Lamb of God who died so the wounds of all his lost little lambs could be healed.

And he sealed that victory with his resurrection didn't he!? The Bible tells us in Hebrews chapter 13: **God... brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep.** Yes, we have a living Shepherd! And that means that he not only loves and protects us now, but he will do so forever. So even if the wolves of sin threaten, and the lions of death encircle you... Jesus will bring you safely through it all. Nothing, not your sin, not even your death, can undo the work of your Good Shepherd. Your Jesus lives to forgive you. He lives to spare you from harm. He lives to turn trouble into blessing... sadness into joy... yes, even life into death!

With the Good Shepherd at the Gate. you can know you are loved... know you will be safe forever. I just wanna be a sheep. By the grace of God, I am. And so are you. Amen.

**The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. Amen.**

**Psalm 23:1**