

You are sheep. An old farmer once told me he hated it when his preacher said that. He told me, "When I was a kid, I herded sheep. I know sheep. They're timid, they're afraid of everything, and they're stupid, and I don't like being compared to them!"

But the Lord uses this metaphor so often we can't ignore it. There's **Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.** And there's **Psalm 100: "We are (God's) people and the sheep of his pasture."** In the Bible there are nearly 200 references to sheep, most of which describe our relationship to God.

That's what we're going to talk about today, our life as sheep, and what this means in our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

JOHN 10:1-10

(Jesus said,) "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. 7 So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

In the Gospel, **Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber."** Later on, **he said, "I am the door of the sheepfold."** The "**sheepfold**" is a metaphor for the place where God's people gather together, that is, the church.

When Jesus said he was “the door of the sheepfold, he was saying that to be one of God’s people, we know and believe what he taught about life and death, judgment and salvation, hell and heaven. The alternative is to enter the **“sheepfold”** through **“thieves and robbers”** who **“steal and kill and destroy.”**

“Thieves and robbers” are false teachers, and they are a real threat to our salvation. But Jesus doesn’t want to lose a single one of us, and that’s why he said we’re sheep, that is, we need his help.

Thankfully, **“thieves and robbers”** are easy to identify, and Jesus keeps it simple. After all, he’s talking to sheep! Indeed, he doesn’t tell us that we have to become experts in theology in order to identify false teachers. Instead of addressing the details of false teachings, he points to the RESULTS of false teachings. **He said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.”**

In the Gospel, Jesus’ words about **“thieves and robbers”** contrasts dramatically with his words of promise. He said, **“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be **SAVED** and will go in and out and find pasture.... I came that they may have **LIFE** and have it abundantly.” Jn 10:9-10**

That’s the promise: salvation and life in Christ. He is our hope amidst the darkness in which we live.

From time-to-time I meet a person who doesn’t have a church home, and they ask me, “Where do you think I should go to church?”

If they couldn’t attend your church, what would you say? The goal is to avoid **“thieves and robbers”** and help them find the voice of the Good Shepherd.

The easy answer used to be, “Find an LCMS church and go there.” But that isn’t how people think anymore, is it? Institutional loyalty is thinner than rice paper. And I can assure you that in Southern California unless you’re talking to an LCMS Lutheran, the person you’re talking to doesn’t know what an LCMS church is!

So what would you say?

Based on the Gospel, what I say to people who ask me for a church is, “Go to a church where your heart is lifted up with the words of Jesus, where you’re filled with joy and peace. Listen to that preacher who makes your salvation real for you today. Go to that church where God’s grace is truly grace; his love and acceptance are free, are without limit, and are unconditional. That’s the voice of the Good Shepherd.

A man tells the story of a real shepherd leading real sheep. He said that he was in Israel, and that he stood on a plateau overlooking a valley watching a shepherd walk among his sheep on a ridge. The shepherd spoke gently to his sheep with a lilting sing-song voice. The sheep were at ease, at peace with their master.

The man watched the shepherd walk among the sheep until he passed over the ridge and disappeared into the valley below.

For a moment the sheep remained as they were, each one with its nose in the grass. But then, suddenly, as if the entire flock realized simultaneously the shepherd had disappeared, there was a chorus of panic stricken bleating.

The man who saw this said that just as the flock appeared to be ready to stampede, “From a distance came the strange laughing call of the shepherd, and at the sound of it the entire flock rushed into the hollow of the valley after him.”

Sheep know their master’s voice. They know the voice of the one who cares for them, loves them, and gives them life, and they follow it.

The Gospel reads that **“This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.”** The reason they did not understand was not because they didn’t get the metaphor about sheep. It is the simplest image in the world to understand. Even you and I get it, and for many of us the closest we have ever been to a sheep is a fluff of cotton on a flannel board in VBS when we were six!

The reason the people Jesus spoke to didn’t understand what he was saying to them was because they refused to accept the fact that it could be true, that they WERE sheep, that they were timid, fear-filled creatures! And they certainly didn’t

want to be the sheep of Jesus, a shepherd who was in fact a scruffy rabbi carpenter from the hinterlands of Galilee!

That's pride talking. And that is the one thing that we have in us which can separate us from the love of God.

But the voice of the Good Shepherd is filled with life, a voice that leads us into green pastures and beside still waters.

Faith Lutheran Church has a whole bunch of things that give life. We have life-giving water in baptism. We have life-giving food at the Lord's Table. We have the life-giving proclamation of the Word of God in worship and Bible study. And the life in these things spills over into the other things we do, things like fellowship, and acts of service, and prayer.

And we have the Lord's words, which we may use to bring one another back into the sheepfold. There was a time when I was along, when I felt abandoned by God, but a Christian friend said to me, Jesus loves you, and nothing in heaven or on earth can steal that away from you. Those words, the words of Jesus coming from the mouth of my friend, lifted me up and set me free from the self-condemnation that lay on my heart, and opened up to me a new beginning in the love of God.

Life is hard, and, in truth, none of us is smart enough or clever enough to make it on our own. When we agree with Jesus that we need his help, then we can pray, **Lord Jesus, be my Good Shepherd**. Please say it me. (Lord Jesus, be my Good Shepherd.)

There's nothing wrong with being a sheep. Indeed, the life of a sheep ain't so baaa-d.

The Scripture reads, **"The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."**

When I was a kid from time-to-time I would hear my mom yell, "Richard Ross Junior!" That's when I wished my name was Sam, or Joe, or Steve, anything but Richard Ross Junior! I knew I was in trouble.

Friends in Christ, Jesus knows YOUR name. But when he calls it, it's not because you're in trouble. Jesus calls your name because of what he has already done for you on the Cross on Calvary.

He says, "You are mine. You are my sheep and I am your shepherd. Hear my voice and follow me, follow me and be saved, be filled with life, life in abundance. Hear my voice and find pasture."

Brothers and sisters, this week as you read your Bibles, may you become ever more familiar with the voice of the Good Shepherd that you may recognize and flee from the "**thieves and robbers,**" the false teachers.

This week may you find good pasture, that place the Lord has prepared for you in his heart which is filled with peace and joy.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this Good News with another sheep who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.