

### **“Flocking Sheep” – John 10:11-18**

I suspect most of you have seen those comedy skits in movies or on TV in which someone has dropped a copy of an unbound manuscript and the pages got quickly – and incorrectly – reassembled. That is usually a farcical slap-stick kind of incident and the accidental re-arrangement of the pages leads to some other development in the plot. I mention this because our text from John’s gospel today appears to have been part of a similar re-arrangement. We may not notice it here because the verses we are working with are part of a block, but the block they are part of is believed by many serious scholars to have been misplaced as the dropped pages were gathered together. The affected pages are all part of what we now call Chapter 10 (the original authors did not assign the chapters and verses ... that happened many centuries later!) If you are interested in checking this out for yourself the suggested reconstruction that immediately follows Chapter 9 is 10:19-29, 1-18, 30-42.

So why do I even confuse you with all of this? Well, recognizing this rearrangement modifies our view of the context in which our verses are set and as most of you know I believe that understanding context is crucially important to helping us understand what is happening and what is being said. That understanding is in turn important to helping us hear what God is saying to us from this text.

To begin, in Chapter 9 Jesus upsets his listeners and ignites a controversy through the familiar healing of a man blind from birth. Jesus’ disciples started the controversy by asking a serious theological question, asking about the reason the man was born blind and whose sin had caused such a tragedy. Jesus answered them that nobody had sinned but instead the man was born blind in order that God’s works might be revealed in him and he then healed the man who had never seen before. Instead of rejoicing at this miracle the Pharisees reacted badly and Jesus accused them of being the ones who were truly blind. Note that verses 19-21 of Chapter 10 nicely round out and finish Chapter 9. The scene then shifts to the Feast of Dedication where verses 24-29 introduce the subject of Jesus as the good shepherd, a theme which is expanded in the verses that include our reading for today. Verse 30 provides the punctuation mark in which Jesus summarizes with the brief but powerful declaration, “I and the Father are one.”

So, it seems our passage today doesn’t arise out of the blue but is part of an explanation of an example Jesus gave to the Jews who had gathered around him asking him to declare clearly and plainly whether or not he was the Christ, the Messiah. He began his response by telling them he had already told them but they did not believe and that the works he had done in his Father’s name bore witness to that. “You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice and they follow me” he told them and then went on to elaborate on that imagery.

Now that we know where this particular piece fits into the larger puzzle, what can we glean from it that helps us in our faith? Perhaps the first thing comes from the ending – the assurance that Jesus has the authority to make the statements he is making. Recalling that his response is an answer to the question asked by the Jews who were questioning him, we hear Jesus make a firm, clear, and definitive claim to be one with God – the Messiah, the Christ. Remember also that this is John’s gospel, and everything John presents he does so with the resurrection of Jesus providing a brilliantly shining background light. Those who were questioning Jesus needed to have pointed out to them the works that he was doing – such as healing the blind man – but through Jesus’ resurrection we have a clearer and more definitive answer. When Jesus states he is the Messiah, the Christ and speaks about looking after his sheep we are aware that we are part of the sheep he is tending.

Given the authority of Jesus to make such claims we have perhaps a new perspective on the image of the good shepherd “laying down his life.” Of course we cannot, with the echoes of the resurrection to come ringing clearly in our ears, help hearing this as an image of Jesus dying. This image is underscored by his declaration that he has the authority to lay down his own life, that it is a calling from God and nobody can take his life from him. However this is for me one of those times when the imagery, when looked at a little bit deeper, causes some questions to be raised. For example, if a shepherd dies protecting the sheep – say for example is killed by the wolf pack – then who is left to defend the sheep? Comfortingly we can look at a different way to hear the expression “lay down a life” and that is to see it in terms of giving up one’s life to a lifetime of service. This is, I think, closer to the image of a good shepherd, offering a picture of one for whom the sheep are everything – every waking moment is devoted to providing the kind of loving, tender care that sheep need to stay alive. Even sleeping for a devoted shepherd is done with one ear half-awake, listening for the first sign of trouble, of invaders at the door of the sheepfold. This image gives us a picture that I believe is closer to the Jesus we experience – not just willing to die but even more willing to live to continue protecting his sheep – to continue protecting us.

And then there is that curious statement about “I have sheep that do not belong to this fold.” When we understand the probable context, namely that Jesus was speaking to Jews who were questioning him in the Temple at the Feast of Dedication, we can begin to hear that the message of caring, of forgiving and of redemption was not only for them but for the Gentiles as well. Here is an affirmation that all peoples could be brought into Christ’s flock. Not that all would be folded into one homogenous blend which is a blessing; the richness and variety of peoples have been preserved even as we all became part of his flock. There have always been and there continue to be today strong pressures from various corners within the Christian faith attempting to compel people to adopt one singular way of being part of the flock. But that is not what we hear from this declaration from Christ that there are various folds, even as they are and will be part of the same flock, and we are all richer for that. This is a foundational message of inclusion, helping us to recognize that all peoples are welcome through faith into Christ’s flock.

We are sinful people, and the church reflects our sinfulness. Thank God that we have at the heart of our faith, at the foundation of the church, the sinless goodness of Jesus Christ. He was able to counter any claims of self-indulgence, of self-aggrandizement, of not caring about the people he encountered with the deep and personal counter-claim, “I am the good shepherd”. And just in case there was any doubt in the minds of those who heard him about what it meant to be a good shepherd, Jesus made it perfectly clear the lengths to which he was prepared to go, pointing out that the “good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” The people around Jesus, living in a society so closely tied to the land, so familiar with farming practices would have been familiar with the characteristics of a good shepherd, but Jesus made it perfectly clear to them, and to us, what he meant. Those people, encountering flocks of sheep even in the city streets, would have understood that sheep are fragile creatures, needing much tender oversight and care. They would have known from experience that sheep really do play “follow-the-leader”, even when that means over the cliff edge or down some other self-destructive path. The people around Jesus would have understood that a moment’s inattention is all that is required for sheep, and for people, to get into more trouble than they can handle, and the shepherd must be ever-vigilant. They knew how vulnerable sheep are to predators, and how vulnerable people are to predators from within, wolves in sheep’s clothing, so to speak. For a shepherd to lay down his life for the sheep was the ultimate, was way beyond the normal, the usual, the required.

But back to the declaration that Jesus made, “I am the good shepherd ... who lays down his life for the sheep.” That is the promise that Jesus kept. We, the Easter people of his church, acknowledge and proclaim that he did keep that promise, that he did keep his promise of laying down his life for his sheep. On a cross, on a hill, tending his sheep as no other before or since has done or even could do, laying down his life that their lives, our lives, would be assured. And with the full grace and glory of God returning not just from the cross but from the tomb of death, rising again to fulfil the validity of his claim to be the good shepherd, guarding his flock for all time. What a wondrous, glorious way to confirm, to validate, to prove his claim to the Jews and to us that he is the good shepherd.

That message of self-sacrifice, that message of grace promised and fulfilled in Christ’s death and resurrection and endless ongoing care is the model of the shepherd to which the flock, the church, we are called to respond. We are called as we are able to act as shepherds, to provide the same kind of loving care to others in the flock. This is a call to the church and to the people who make up the church to set aside the interests of self in the service of others. Regularly we are called to put down the melodious pan flute of our own voice in order to hear the faint bleats for help from sheep who have wandered. Occasionally we are called to move out from the cool, comfortable shade of the tree under which we are resting, and walk in the hot, thirsty blazing sun to find the sheep who have gone missing. From time to time we will have to get up from the safety and security of our campfire and stumble off into the terror of the night to help sheep who are ill, or ravaged by the wolves or the demons of the darkness. It’s not all bad, because often we will in our service as shepherds experience the joy of welcoming newborn sheep, helping them to suckle, teaching them how to be safe, helping them grow into maturity ready to take their place helping others in the flock. Once in a while we will be called to act as protectors of other sheep who have heard the voice of safety, and who have come into this flock, protectors not only against predators from without but from cold shoulders within, and come to rejoice in the strength and vigour that the flock has received from the newcomers.

That’s a challenge, but is a comfort as well. The comfort of hearing the one in whom God’s power is so complete profess and promise, “I am the good shepherd” and being confident and comforted that we are part of his flock. All honour and glory be to God who made that promise come true in the resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd.