

8 May 2022

John 10:22-30

Good Shepherd Sunday

Pastor Fraser Pearce

Let's say a co-worker or a friend or even a spouse
Says words of affirmation and encouragement to us,
To our face: that can indeed be encouraging.
But questions can also come up in our minds,
Especially perhaps as we have longer experience of life:
'Why is this person being so nice to me?
What do they want from me? Are they about to ask for a favour?
What are their motivations?'

After all, someone can flatter us to our face,
But bite us or worse when we are out of earshot.
That's an unfortunate reality of life,
But, as our Lord says, we should be wise as serpents
And not just innocent as doves:
We should understand the deceit that happens in life,
Even if we as God's people are called to speak the truth to each other,
To speak the truth in love.

But let's say we hear a recording of a co-worker or friend or spouse,
And the recording is of a situation where they are facing opposition
From people who are threatening in some way to them,
And let's say in *that* recording we hear them speaking about us,
In the same words of affirmation and encouragement.
We wouldn't think about what they want out of us,
Rather, we'd be impressed that they speak up for us
In the face of opposition.
We'd more easily trust in their good will to us;
We'd understand more easily the genuineness of their conviction
In their words of affirmation and encouragement.

Well, in today's reading from John
We hear words that Jesus says about us,
But not words that he says directly to us.
John wrote his Gospel to bring us to faith in Jesus,
And to keep us on the path of faith,
And in today's reading we hear what Jesus has to say about us
When he is faced by people who oppose him,
By people who murderously oppose him.

Today I'm proclaiming Good News from God's word:

When Jesus speaks about us to those who oppose him,
This is what he says:
That we listen to him, that he gets to know us,
That he gives us eternal life, and that we will not be lost:
Jesus says to those who fundamentally oppose him
That no one can snatch us out of his hand.

This is how today's reading begins: **At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon.**

The festival of the Dedication is what we would call Hannukah,
A festival that celebrates the renewal or rededication of the temple
After the Maccabean revolt: after the temple had been cleansed
From its desecration at the hands of a Syrian leader
Called Antiochus 'Epiphanies'.

You can read about this in the Deuterocanonical book of 1 Maccabees
(A book that we don't read from the lectern in worship,
But that was included both in Luther's translation of the Bible
And in printings of the KJV until 1885.

It's worth a read as part of our heritage as Lutheran Christians).

Jesus is in the portico of Solomon,
A place that gave shelter from the Winter winds,
And that was evidently also part of the first temple built by Solomon,
As well the meeting place of the first Christians (Acts 5:12).

It's here that Jesus faces a challenge: **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.'**

Of course, Jesus and all his disciples were Jewish
In our sense of the word, so we have to keep our minds open
About what the word means in the specific contexts that we hear it
In John's Gospel.

As it happens, in the previous chapter we have heard
About Jesus healing the man born blind,
We have heard about the way the man came to confess his belief
That Jesus was the Son of Man, and how he worshipped him.

At the end of the chapter we read these words: **Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.**

It's immediately after this that Jesus begins to speak to these people
About the fact that he is the Good Shepherd.

This creates a division among his hearers:

Some think that he has a demon,

Others ask how someone with a demon can open the eyes of the blind.

It's these divided people who want Jesus to speak plainly to them.

But, we learn, Jesus *has* been plain with them,
But they have not believed. This is what he says: **'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.**

And it's then that Jesus talks about his sheep,
It's then that we, who have come to believe in Jesus,
Hear what he says about us.

The first thing that he says is: **My sheep hear my voice.**
That is, they keep on listening to what he has to say.
As baptised people we know that it is Jesus' word that keeps us in faith.
We do outward actions to remind us of this,
Like standing to hear the Gospel in the Divine Service.
But we also encourage each other to hear his word
And to think about what he says to us.
We know that if someone is dismissive of Jesus commands,
If they speak and act as if what Jesus says is of little or no consequence
Then something is spiritually wrong.
The sheep show that they are sheep
By listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd.

The second things that Jesus says about his sheep is: **I know them**
One way to think about this is that we who believe in Jesus
Pray to him: that we let him know what is on our hearts,
And we do this when no one is watching, on our own, in private.
In life it's one thing to know about a person,
To know facts about their life.
It's another to get to know them: to hear them say in their own words
What is happening for them, how they think, how they feel.
And it is like this in our relationship with our Good Shepherd:
We not only listen to his word, we speak our words to him.

Then Jesus says of his sheep: **They follow me.**
Let's remember here that Jesus is speaking to people
Who will not admit their spiritual blindness.
This is not how it is for God's flock.
In 1 John the apostle speaks about what it means to follow Jesus,
About what it means to walk with him.
This is what he says: **If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.**
This can sound rather obscure, but then John goes on to spell out

What this walking in the light means: **If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.**

To follow Jesus, to walk in his light, is to confess our sin,
And it is to have Jesus forgive our sins and cleanse us.

This can help us understand what Jesus goes on to say

In today's reading: **I give them eternal life**

As sheep in the flock of the Good Shepherd,
We know that we cannot earn life with God,
But that we can only receive what God has to give.

It is because eternal life is God's gift to us,
Rather than something that comes from our own shaky commitment
Or our own ability to live by faith, that Jesus can say of us:

They will never perish, no one will snatch them out of my hand.

Spiritually we are like sheep: vulnerable, open to being preyed upon.
But we have a Good Shepherd who is with us,
Who will not let us be lost or snatched away from him,
Even when we go through the darkest valleys.

And it is our Good Shepherd who prepares a table before us

In the presence of our enemies:

Even in the presence of our great enemy, death.
On the night when he was betrayed he spoke to us,
And said, **'Take and eat, this is my body...**

**Drink of it all of you, this is my blood
Shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.'**

You have heard how the Lord Jesus speaks about you
Even in the face of opposition.

Listen to what the Lord Jesus says to you,
Come as those who have confessed their sins,
Who call on the name of the Lord,
And who have a Good Shepherd who live and reigns
With the Father and the Son, one God, now and forever. Amen.