

“No Greater Security”

Dear Friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus.

This past week I came across a rather humorous story of a new design of plane that was making its initial flight. As a result of it being the first flight ever, (as you can imagine) it was filled to capacity.

Not long after takeoff, the captain came on and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m delighted to be your pilot for this historic flight. And I can tell you that the flight is going well. Nevertheless, I do have to tell you about a few unexpected events that have occurred.”

“If you’re sitting on the right side, (and look out the window), you might notice that one of the engines is vibrating (more than normal). Don’t worry, because we’re maintaining our altitude and speed. And (as long as you’re looking out the window), you might also notice that the other engine has stopped running. Again, don’t worry, because this plane is designed to run on only two engines, if needed.”

“Now, as long as you’re looking out the windows, those of you on the left side might notice that the tip of the wing has broken loose. (Actually it fell off about ten minutes ago), but (in spite of what’s happened) we’re doing just fine.”

“And finally, (he said), I do need to tell you (also) that we’re developing a small crack down the center of the plane (that was also unexpected). In fact, (some of you) might be able to look through the crack and see a lifeboat that was thrown into the ocean. But don’t worry. You will be pleased to know that your captain is keeping a close eye on the progress of the plane from that lifeboat below.”

Now, as I read that story, I had to laugh. And I laughed, because it’s the kind of thing that would never happen. But also (as I was reading) I had to wonder (even though it would never happen) if it isn’t (more often than not) the way it often times happens in life?

(You know how it works.) Everything’s going just fine, until (all of a sudden) the unexpected happens. A call from your doctor, with results you never thought would be yours. A conversation with your boss that the job, (you thought was secure), was now being cut. Troubles with your kids, challenges in your marriage, and (before you know it) the flight (of your life) begins to fall apart. And the one you thought was in control seems as remote as the captain in the raft below.

The title for our message today is “No Greater Security.” (“No Greater Security”). Based upon our gospel reading, it’s a story that helps us remember that (as followers of Jesus) we’re never alone in this life. And not only are we not alone, but we have the promise and assurance and security that we will always, and forever, belong to him.

Let’s turn to our story. The story we read today (taken from the tenth chapter of John’s gospel) is one that comes near the end of Jesus’ ministry, at a time when (those who were following) needed to make a decision about who he was and what his life and teachings were all about, and whether or not they would continue to follow. John says it was the Feast of Dedication. It was winter, (he says) and Jesus was walking in the temple.

Now, before going too far into the story (and what it has to say to us), it’s worth noting that (in John’s gospel), we often times find details that give us insights into things that go beyond the surface of what’s being said.

For example, when John talks about darkness and light, he’s (more often than not) alluding not only to physical conditions, but to spiritual realities. The same thing when he says it was winter. There was a spiritual chill in the air. There was an uneasiness, a discontent, a feeling (among the people) of not liking what was happening. And it was apparent.

John says it was winter (and Jesus was in the Temple). And he says that the people wanted to know where this was all going, and what to expect. (And so they asked him.) They said, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ (they said), then tell us plainly.”

Now, in Jesus' day, that was not only a big question, it was the big question. For the Jews, their whole national history, the sum total of their religion was centered around finding the answer to it. They were waiting for the Savior, longing for the coming of the Messiah. (And so) they said, "Who are you?" They said, "If you are the Christ, then don't keep us guessing any longer."

Now, (to their credit) if nothing else, we'd have to say that at least the people (in Jesus' day) were asking the right question. Many people (in our day) go through life and not only fail to find answers, but never even ask the right questions. If the central question is "Who is this Jesus?" a lot of people (today) don't even ask questions that are peripheral.

Questions about life and the meaning of life? Questions about who we are and why we're here? Questions about the character and content of our morality? Does it matter? Does it make a difference? Is there a god? And if there is, what does that mean for my life?

Now, some would say those answers can't be found. Others would say it doesn't matter. Still others (probably more than we realize) are too busy filling their lives with all kinds of pursuits (that finally lead to a dead end), and so they never even ask.

"Who is this Jesus?" (That's the question they asked.) And that's the question (every one of us here today) needs to ask (and answer) for ourselves. Is he really the Son of God? Is he really the one sent to save us from our sin? Did he really die on a cross and come back to life? And if he did, then what does that mean for your life?

If you remember the story, Jesus said, "I did tell you, but you did not believe." He said, "The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me. But you do not believe, because you are not my sheep."

Now, we're talking today about security, about being at peace and secure in this life. Let's talk for a few moments about what it means to be one of Jesus' sheep, about belonging to the shepherd. Because there's a big difference between knowing who Jesus is, and following him as one of his sheep.

I read an article this past week that was talking about the characteristics of sheep. (We've talked about this before.) Sheep are not the smartest animals in the world. They're not independent or creative. They're not brave or (even together) able to do much of any value. And they have a tendency to wander off and do their own thing, more often than, oblivious to what's happening around them. The writer said they usually "nibble themselves lost." They go from one tuft of grass to another until (when they finally look up) they've lost their way.

I read the article and (I thought) no wonder Jesus compares us to sheep. Nibbling our way through life, a bit of this and a bit of that, without paying attention, and (before we know it) we're lost.

Now, I hate the comparison. There's not much flattering about sheep. But it's true. And it's happening all around.

But there are two characteristics of sheep that are good. And Jesus mentions both in the story. One is that sheep know the voice of their shepherd. When the shepherd calls, they recognize the voice. They hear it. It gets their attention. They perk up. And two, they not only recognize it (and listen), but they follow. In fact, sheep will follow nothing else. Any other voice (besides that of their shepherd), and they either stand there doing nothing, or they scatter and run away.

But not when the shepherd calls. When the shepherd calls, they recognize his voice. And when they recognize his voice, they listen to what he says and they follow.

Now, take that comparison (to sheep) and apply it to your life. And then ask yourself what you think. Are you listening to the voice of the shepherd? Are you following where the shepherd leads? Or are you nibbling your way through life, wandering aimlessly (without direction) from one voice to the next?

"No Greater Security." I hear people give their critiques of the Christian faith and life. They say things like "It's too narrow." Or "It's too confining." Or "It doesn't allow (me) the freedom to do and say what I want to do and say in life."

And you know, maybe it is. (Maybe it is.) After all, Jesus did say, "The gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (They might be right.)

And so what do they do? They go off and do and say (in life) whatever they want to do and say in life. And they follow the voices they hear. And they talk about being spiritual, seeking to build (something) between themselves and God that makes them feel good.

But do you know what? It doesn't work. (It doesn't work.) It always comes up empty. And how come? Because it ignores the truth. Because it's built on a reality that isn't real. Because (the truth is) there is a Shepherd (and his name is Jesus). And we are sheep and we do get lost. And until we learn to listen and to follow, we always will.

There is no greater security (in life) than belonging to the shepherd and knowing you're one of his sheep. There's no greater security (in your life) than listening to his voice and following where he leads.

You know, I've been doing this "pastoring thing" for going on 24 years. The word "pastor" means "shepherd." It comes from a Latin word that means "one who feeds." (You might remember), but the last words Jesus said to Peter were to "feed my sheep." A pastor's job is to "feed" the flock and to point the sheep to Jesus.

Do you know what I've seen in these (nearly 24 years) of being a pastor, (what I've learned) from watching the sheep? It's not the only thing (going on in the story) and it's certainly not the only thing I've learned. But most sheep, (most people), what they want (more than anything else) is to know that the shepherd cares, to know that he knows their name, and that (he knows) what's happening in their life.

Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice. (And then he says), I know them and they follow. And I give them eternal life and no one will snatch them from my hand."

I still remember the story of the census taker (we're in the middle of a national census), the census taker who was making his way up and down the street. As he came to one house, there was a woman in the front yard, bending over a washtub, and doing the laundry.

As he approached her (he said), "Lady, I'm taking the census and I'd like to ask you a few questions." She said, "Fine, go ahead." He said, "First, what's your name?" She said, "My name is Maria." He said, "Maria, how many children do you have?" She said, "Well, my children, there's Marcia and Dougie, and Amy and Patrick, and Philip and Susie..." But before she could finish, he interrupted. He said, "Never mind the names, just give me the numbers."

And that's when the woman stood up and said, "My friend, I'll have you know that I have quite a number of children in this house. Now, if you want to count them, that's up to you. But we're not into numbering our children (she said). All I can tell you are their names."

There's no greater security in life than being known by the shepherd. There's no greater security in (your life) than knowing that you're known by name.

That's what Jesus says. (Did you hear that?) He doesn't say that the sheep follow because they know him. He says the sheep follow because he knows them. (He knows them.)

Did you know that? Jesus knows your life. He knows what's happening in your life. The challenges you face, the troubles you're facing. He knows your worries and your anxieties and your fears. And he loves you. He knows your life and he loves what he knows.

Now, it's interesting that Jesus never says that his sheep will be free from harm. (He doesn't say that.) He says they listen and they follow, and he knows them by name, gives them eternal life. But he doesn't say they'll be free from harm. What he says is that he'll always be there, and that when all is said and done, his sheep will belong to him.

It's like the mother (with eight children) who was asked if she had any favorites. She said, "Yes. I have favorites." She said, "My favorite is the one who is sick, until he's well again." She said, "My favorite is the one who is in trouble, until she is safe again." And she said, "My favorite is the one who is farthest away from home, until he makes his way back."

My friends, that's how it is with God. (That's how it is with your life.) Jesus knows your life. He knows what's happening in your life.

Now, he doesn't promise you a struggle-free life, free from the challenges and troubles and conflicts of this world. But he knows your name. (He knows your life.) And he's there and he cares, so much so that he went all the way to the cross. And you might even be his favorite, especially if you're going through something troubling (in your life) right now.

“No Greater Security.” The other night I was watching television. I don’t know how many of you have seen the commercial (it’s been running for some time) from a company called Bay Alarm? (Bay Alarm.) It’s a security company that makes its business on installing and monitoring security systems for homes.

Now, I don’t want to end this message (today) with a commercial (and certainly not one) for an alarm system for your house. But the slogan they use (at the end of their commercial) caught my attention. (And it fits.) And it fits, not only for their alarm company, but for your life.

Have you seen it? Do you remember what it says? After showing a home that has been burglarized and damaged, and comparing it with one that’s safe and secure, the slogan pops up, (and says) “What have you got to lose?” (What have you got to lose?)

Jesus says, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.”

My friends, do you know that security in your life? Are you listening to the shepherd’s voice and following? If not, it’s not too late. Because he knows your name. He knows what’s happening in your life. And there’s a life and an eternity, not to lose, but to gain, in Christ. Amen.