

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
Pastor Jonna Bohigian

May 12, 2019
John 10:22-30

My Sheep Know My Voice

There are some days when sermon-writing comes easily. The text is straight-forward and inviting and you know *immediately* how this text is meant for the local church. And then there are other days and texts which prove to be much more difficult, and you have writer's block for hours.

In preparing for this morning's sermon, I experienced quite a lot of writer's block. I can think of a couple reasons for this. One, it's Mother's Day. Mother's Day is one of those holidays that can be really wonderful. It can also be really difficult – for a variety of reasons. If you have a strained or non-existent relationship with your mom or if you are mourning the loss of your mom, days like today can be really difficult. It can also be really difficult if you have struggled to have children or if you have lost a child.

In writing today's sermon, I could not get past my writer's block until I acknowledged that this would be a difficult day for me. This is the first Mother's Day that it strikes me in a profound way that I am *not* a mother – and I would like to be. I discovered in January that I have a medical condition which may make it difficult to have children. Most often, I am able to celebrate with new moms and enjoy all the little ones around me. Other times, I feel a profound sadness, like a dagger to the heart, when I see little ones, hear their peals of laughter, or think about them. I never knew how much I wanted to be a mom until I received that news in January. Infertility, loss, and pain are not uncommon, so I wanted to share my pain with you, even as I celebrate my mom and celebrate you being a mom.

Another reason I struggled with writer's block is because this is not an easy text to hear and to share. It's an easy and comforting text if you are a sheep. But what about those who are not sheep? Let's bite the bullet and dig into the text.

In John 10, Jesus is at the temple at the Feast of Dedication. This temporal marker frames the conversation that follows, so let me paint a picture of what this is. In December of 168 B.C., an altar of Zeus was erected by the king in the Jerusalem Temple. This was absolutely *horrifying* to the Jews,

because this was the temple of the one true God, and not Zeus. Three years later, a Jew named Judas Maccabaeus came in and removed the altar of Zeus. He “restored, purified, and rededicated the temple.” This day was then celebrated every year as a day of renewal. It was named the Feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah. This celebration is kept every year, so that the Jews “might be invigorated by the memory of their last great national deliverance.”¹

In John 10, it is now the time of the Feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah, and the Jews are reminded of their deliverance 200 years prior. They yearn to be free of their current Roman occupation, so they descend on Jesus. *Is he or is he not* the one to restore them, the one to free them from Roman occupation? Is he or is he not the Christ, the Messiah?

They want to know, perhaps because they want to know who to get behind. If Jesus is planning on overthrowing the Romans and delivering the Jews, they want to know *now*. No more lolly-gagging here, Jesus.

As Christians, we know that Jesus *is* the Christ, the Messiah, but he wasn't a political Messiah. He did not come to overthrow the Romans or to establish an earthly kingdom. Jesus was a Messiah who overthrew a *different* power and established a *different* kind of kingdom. He overthrew the power of sin, death, and the devil, and established the kingdom of *heaven*. And he did this not through power but through weakness. He became the Messiah through his *death*.

We know by the way John writes this story in chapter 10, that these men simply don't get Jesus. They *descend* on him. They surround him. This is not some polite, friendly conversation. They are ready to act, and they demand to know if Jesus is the one to lead them.

They don't get it. They don't get Jesus. Now, how many of you here struggle because people don't get you? Yeah, I hear you. Imagine being *Jesus*.

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 640.

To these men, Jesus doesn't offer a clever or a maternal response. Jesus' response is in fact really *uncomfortable*. In verse 25 Jesus says, "I told you [who I am], and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock" (Jn 10:25 – 26).

Ouch. Jesus has told them and shown them who he is, but they don't believe because they are not part of Jesus' flock.

Jesus *fascinates* me. I would expect Jesus to say something like, "You don't get it *yet*, but if you want to become one of my sheep, this is what has got to happen." But he doesn't.

Jesus gives them what is called in Lutheran theology "the Law." The Law cuts to the heart. It convicts us. The Law is like a really good spouse or mentor or friend, who doesn't simply tell you what you *want* to hear, but tells you what you *need* to hear. It is the word that you *know* is true, even though you don't want to hear it. The Law is painful. It shows us what we *should* have done and should *not* have done. It tells us that by our own power, we cannot come to God or know Him.

This is where Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed is instructive. And what does it say? I believe that I *cannot* by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.²

The Law is a word that *hurts*. It puts our ego to death. You and I then don't have *anything* to boast in. We do not come to faith by anything we have done or because we are somehow good or special people. You and I are brought to faith by the work of the Holy Spirit.

In verse 27, Jesus goes on to describe his sheep. He says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." Jesus is in a relationship with his sheep. He speaks, and they hear him. He knows them, and they follow him.

² <http://trinitylutheran.info/creed.html>

Frankly, I am not too keen on being called a “sheep.” I keep waiting for someone to tell me that sheep are in fact quite a lot smarter than people give them credit for, but I’m still waiting. Sheep are constantly getting into trouble and getting lost. They cannot do much to protect themselves. They are desperately dependent upon their shepherd for protection. But, they know the voice of the shepherd.

Someone once observed two flocks of sheep being led by Middle Eastern shepherds. The flocks were approaching one another at right angles, sort of like two cars arriving at an intersection. But, rather than one shepherd stopping and waiting for the other to go by, they simply passed through one another, sort of forming an “x” in doing so. All the sheep passed through, none got confused, and all emerged on the other side still following their own shepherds. They knew the voice of their shepherd and followed him.³

Hear the good news. In verse 28 Jesus says, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:28 – 30). Jesus is the good shepherd who will not let his sheep go. He will not let you go. The *Father* won’t let you go. No one will be able to snatch you from their hand. Jesus will lead you and you will know his voice.

The truth is, you and I want to make it all about us. You and I so want to be in charge and make our own rules. We have been taught to be leaders, not followers, after all! How often have we heard, “My God wouldn’t do that. My God is like this.” Everything about us *screams* control, from our lack of obedience to God to the way we want to define Him. Jesus here reminds us that we are the sheep and it is our *job* to listen and to follow the voice of our shepherd.

Being a sheep demands a humble posture. It requires listening and following. It demands that we become like children.

³ In an e-mail from Jim Bangsund, April 25, 2018.

When we were children, we were wholly dependent on our parents to care for us. We needed them to shelter us, to clothe us, to feed us, to hold us, and to *force* us to go to bed when our whining got out of hand. And then we became teenagers, and we lost that sense of dependency. Teenagers think they know it all, but so do adults, don't we? We can say that teenagers are difficult and don't listen to anyone because they think they know it all, but gosh! That describes most *adults* I know! It is a rare find when you encounter someone who has the humility to acknowledge that they were wrong, that they have a lot to learn, that they truly value your opinion, or that they are in need. What's fascinating is that most often, I hear people *apologize* when they cry, *hide* when they show weakness, and *ashamed* when they are in need.

But if we never cry, if we never show weakness, and we are never in need, when can Jesus come to comfort us? When can Jesus come in the form of our brothers and sisters in the church with a hug and a listening ear? How can we follow Jesus if we never need him?

This is where children are so instructive. They are so amazingly honest and *human*. And they show us how to love Jesus.

Have you ever listened to children describe God? It is amazing. Often, at our St. Tim's Academy Chapels, there will be a time for proclamation, for the kids to proclaim who God is to everyone present. I can't tell you how many times I've heard a child who is really struggling say that *God is great* with a shout! Others follow with *He is love. He is kind. He is all-powerful.*

Children are truly special and a real gift. They have an ability to see and listen to the voice of Jesus that many of us adults have simply lost. This is why Jesus said that unless we become like little children, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:3). Look at the little ones around you. Look at your children, and become like *them*. For when you are weak, he is strong. Amen.