

Sermon for May 12, 2008

THE FLOCK OF GOD

The Gospel reading from John, designated for our hearing in this season of Eastertide, is actually a Hanukkah story. The "Festival of Dedication," in Hebrew called "Hanukkah," celebrates the successful Maccabean revolt against the notorious Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes, who mercilessly persecuted the Jews, and profaned the Temple by setting up a pagan idol. Judas Maccabeus drove out this foreign oppressor, cleansed the Temple, and rededicated it to the worship of God. The festival was kind of like our Fourth of July and Reformation Day rolled into one; it was a day to celebrate both national independence and religious independence, which in the thinking of ancient Jews were one and the same thing.

In the midst of this festival, when Jews' hopes for national and religious independence ran especially high, Jesus made a claim to be the "good shepherd," evoking popular images of the shepherd messiah described by the prophet Ezekiel. In that prophetic passage, God declares, "I myself will search for my sheep...I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered...." (Ezek. 34:11-12). This divine shepherding was to be exercised through a descendant of King David: "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David...he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their god, and my servant David shall be prince among them" (Ezek. 34:23-24).

Is it any wonder that Jesus excited messianic speculation by claiming to be the good shepherd? He was staking a claim to be the restorer and ruler of Israel, and yet, not in words that made explicit his candidacy for political office. So as he walks into the Temple, underneath the portico of Solomon, a crowd gathers and implores him to speak plainly. "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, say so."

Jesus answered them with these words: "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." Ouch!

The whole of the New Testament witness revolves around this salient and tragic point, that the long-awaited Messiah was among us, and we didn't recognize him. Why not? Because he was too much like us. And we don't like who we are. We don't like to think of ourselves as sheep who are helpless, foolish and stupid. We would much prefer to be super-heroes like the Avengers, or gods, wielding power, control and authority. But Jesus declares that demigods won't recognize the messiah. They can't, because the messiah is a shepherd, the good shepherd. Only sheep will recognize the good shepherd and follow him. The message is clear. If people do not follow Jesus, it is not because he isn't the good shepherd, but because they are not his sheep. "My sheep hear my voice," said Jesus. "I know them, and they follow me."

To recognize Jesus as the son of God, we must first acknowledge that we are the sheep of God's pasture, sheep who need to be guided, tended, fed, and saved from our own foolishness. And sheep always know the unique call of their shepherd. They hear it clearly, even though other voices call out to them from every direction. The voice of their shepherd is unmistakable. It's just like how a child knows the voice of its mother, and how a mother knows the voice of her child.

Earlier Jesus had said, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (John 10:14-15). And again he said, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). Jesus is the good shepherd who can save us from our wanderings and tribulations because he is one with God. We know of God's providential, shepherding love through Jesus. We also know that no one has the power to snatch God's people away from God. So if Jesus and God are one, then we are truly safe in Jesus' hands. To wit, Paul wrote that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now, the great stumbling block to us recognizing that Jesus is the good shepherd, and our shepherd, is that he is too much like us. How can a fellow sheep, tempted in every way as we are, who also needs to be guided, tended and fed, be the good shepherd? It is this very question which kept so many of the Jews and Gentiles from acknowledging Jesus as Lord. And yet it is this very fact, that not only saves us, but which is at the heart of the good news.

The seer of Revelation, in chapter 7, paints a picture of a great multitude from every nation, "who have come out of the great ordeal [of life]," gathered around the throne of God:

"...And the one who is seated on the throne
will shelter them.
They will hunger no more,
and thirst no more;
The sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb at the center of the throne
will be their shepherd,
And he will guide them
to springs of the water of life,
And God will wipe away every tear
from their eyes."

The "Lamb" will be their "shepherd!" The deepest mystery, at the center of the throne of God, is that the good shepherd turns out to be a Lamb, one of us, pure and spotless to be sure, but nonetheless, one of us. Because he is one with God, he is able to hold us securely in his hand; because he is one of us, we can recognize his voice and follow him. This, in a nutshell, is the saving mystery of the Incarnation.

To live a Christian life, we need to hold in dynamic tension two truths. The one truth, is that Jesus is the shepherd, and we are the sheep of his pasture, protected and guided by his rod and staff. What joy there is in knowing that Jesus has the power to deliver us from all that threatens to undo us! The other truth, is that we are the shepherds, commissioned by Jesus to love and care for one another in the same way he loves and cares for us. Did not Jesus call Peter and the other disciples to tend and feed the flock of God? Truly we are neither sheep nor shepherds; we are both. We are the sheep who shepherd one another, just as Jesus is the Lamb who shepherds us.

It is terribly important to remember that like Jesus, we are called to identify ourselves with those to whom we minister. When we bring and collect food for the hungry, we remember that we too were hungry, until we found food in Jesus Christ. When we put a day's work in on a Habitat home or with Rebuilding Together, we remember that we too were homeless, until we found our home in the church of Jesus Christ. When we teach our children about the love of God, we remember that we too are children in God's eyes. We are sheep and we are shepherds, the body of Christ, seeking to reconcile all persons to God through Jesus Christ. God's word, God's love, is spoken through us, in a language that can be heard by our brothers and sisters with whom we share this earth. And hearing God's word in ours, they will follow, when they are able to acknowledge that they are sheep in need of the providential care of God.

Today, we hear this message not within the context of the "Festival of Dedication," but within the context of embracing our ministry as followers of the risen Lord. That ministry is to live in the world as sheep who are shepherds. We are to lead the unchurched in the ways of righteousness and faith, without ever forgetting that we are just like them, and they just like us. We are to lead them by example, and with a compassion that grows out of our willingness to identify ourselves with them. At the same time we are to be led by Christ, always following his guidance and direction, depending on him to show us the way.

"For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd." It is a strange paradox, this word of God, made flesh among us. To grasp it, we must acknowledge that we are the sheep of God's hand, and that one like us, Jesus of Nazareth, is the good shepherd sent by God to show us the way to new life. Believing that, we find ourselves called to a like ministry as followers of Christ. Together, we are the sheep of God who are shepherds, leading people to new life, by identifying ourselves with their suffering and walking with them hand in hand, into the kingdom of heaven.

PRAYER: Almighty God, like the ninety-nine sheep whom the good shepherd left on the hill to go in search for the one that was lost, may we stay together and care for one another, even as we care for all the sheep of your pasture. We ask this in Jesus' name, the Lamb of God, and our good shepherd. Amen.

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John 10:22-30