

+ John 10:22-30 + Discover Life in the Good Shepherd! + Fourth Sunday of Easter + 25 April 2010 +

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

One of the first hymns many of us learned as children, or even as adults, was a simple children's hymn that starts out, ***"I am Jesus' little lamb..."*** In a little while, we're going to sing that hymn, but it won't be just the kids singing. No, there will be adults and children singing that simple hymn together. Now at first glance, it might seem a little odd for grown adults to call themselves "Jesus' little lambs", but isn't that what we are?

In fact, isn't the picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd cradling a lamb in his arms one of the most comforting Christian images, even for adults? For centuries, in paintings and stained glass windows and sculptures and drawings inside of Roman catacombs, that picture of the Good Shepherd holding a lamb in his arms or on his shoulders has brought comfort and reassurance to frightened, hurting, and dying souls. For good reason, that picture is often one of the first that comes to mind when we think of Jesus.

This morning we don't have an artist's depiction before us, but we do have the words of the Good Shepherd himself. Jesus, after all, is no ordinary shepherd and provides even more for his flock than we can possibly imagine. So today listen closely to the voice of Jesus and rest safely in his loving hands as you **DISCOVER LIFE IN THE GOOD SHEPHERD.**

To discover life in the Good Shepherd, we need to listen to his voice. One winter day before Jesus' death, he was walking through the temple courts when a large crowd suddenly confronted him. In the weeks before this, Jesus had faced increasing opposition. Some thought he was demon-possessed. Others thought he was raving mad. Still others wondered if he was the Messiah. Many just dismissed him, ***"Why listen to him?"*** Hostility was growing against Jesus, so this crowd was no surprise.

"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." These people weren't looking for a Shepherd. No, they wanted to trap Jesus into claiming to be God, which would then give them reason to have him put to death for blasphemy. Of course, Jesus, the all-knowing God, saw through their trap and answered, ***"I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."***

The Shepherd was calling, but they had no intention of listening to his life-giving voice. They didn't want a "shepherd" who had come to suffer and die. No, they wanted a "shepherd" who would bring them glory right now. They wanted a "shepherd" who would give them what they wanted, who would tell them what they wanted to hear, who would help them topple the Roman government and establish an even greater empire, but that's not what they heard from the voice of the Good Shepherd.

They had no good reason to reject him. In the three years prior, Jesus had spoken the Word as God himself. Jesus had backed his claims of being the Messiah with action. In John 9, Jesus healed a man born blind. In John 11, Jesus proved his almighty power again by raising Lazarus from the dead. He had performed countless miracles and proven himself as their Good Shepherd, but they refused to listen to his voice. Their rejection sadly led to the condemning words of the Shepherd, ***"You are not my sheep."***

We eagerly sing ***"I am Jesus' little lamb..."***, but do we always mean it? Are you always happy to be a lamb in Jesus' flock or do you look for something more? Are there times when you wish the Shepherd would tell you what you want to hear and give you what you want when you want it? Are there times when you would rather be "free" to do what you want than to obey his voice especially when you don't like what he tells you?

So easily we ignore the Shepherd's voice. When we do that we're like a lamb so focused on the next juicy tuft of grass that he ignores the voice of his shepherd. The lamb strays from the flock in search of good grass until he finds himself lost in unfamiliar territory with no way of knowing how to get back. When we fail to listen to the Shepherd's voice, the same thing happens to us. On our own, we become lost in the dangerous wilderness of this life and can't find our way back. We lose the assurance of his promises. The world with all its dangers and worries and fear becomes much more terrifying. Uncertainty fills our lives. So what can we do?

The Good Shepherd tells us, ***"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."*** Sheep will only follow a shepherd they can trust. By his actions and the familiarity of his voice, a shepherd gains the trust of his flock so they will follow him wherever he leads them, even when in danger. We have seen Jesus do just that as our Good Shepherd. He willingly gave up the glory of heaven to take on our human flesh, to subject himself to poverty and difficulty and woe in our place. In fact, he went so far as to lay down his life for the

sheep. An ordinary shepherd won't normally do that, but this is no ordinary Shepherd. Months after our lesson, Jesus allowed himself to suffer at the hands of those enemies who wanted his blood. He allowed them to crucify him and take his life, but the Good Shepherd took his life back up again after three days in the tomb. Surely we can listen to his voice when he calls us through the Gospel to follow him.

Ever listening to his voice through the Gospel, you also realize that the Good Shepherd knows you. That means he knows your faults and gifts. He knows your joys and sorrows. He knows what troubles you in the middle of the night, what weighs on your heart, and what you need most. He knows what it took to make you his own and what it takes to keep you in his flock.

"I am Jesus' little lamb; ever glad at heart I am, for my shepherd gently guides me, knows my needs and well provides me, loves me ev'ry day the same, even calls me by my name." The Shepherd knows you and takes care of you, but what brings even more comfort and assurance to your heart is knowing you are safely in his loving hand. ***"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."***

"No one can snatch them out of my hand." No one can snatch you out of the loving hands of your living Savior! Isaiah (40:11) described this when he wrote, ***"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."*** Did you know that Jesus is holding you close to his heart, even during those times when he seems far away? What certainty that gives when you struggle with job insecurity or the fear of the unknown! What comfort that gives when you deal with the loss of a loved one or struggle with a nagging health problem! What confidence that provides the student struggling with living her faith in a liberal school environment or the child dealing with peer pressure or the believing businessman upholding the truth in his workplace!

The Good Shepherd can make those promises because he is ***"one with the Father"*** and has backed his promises with action. When Jesus left death defeated on Easter morning, he proved every promise true. He validated every action with the approval of the holy God. Now you can rest securely in the Savior's pierced hands. ***"No one can snatch them out of my hand!"***

St. Paul took this promise to heart and rejoiced in the confidence of a lamb resting in the Shepherd's arms. ***"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"*** (Romans 8:35) Shall persecution for being children of God? Shall famine or any other force of nature? Shall nakedness or any other want or need? Shall danger or disease or sword? ***"No one can snatch them out of my hand"***, the Lord promises. Absolutely no human being, no warring nation, no force of nature, no illness, no death, no spiritual force or enemy of God will ever be able to tear us away from our Shepherd's pierced hands.

That means you can live boldly trusting that your Savior will guide your every step and provide for your every need. That means you need not fear any evil as you walk the path of life. That means you can daily cling to your loving Shepherd, because he won't let go of you. That means you can speak up for the truth and speak the truth in love. That means that no matter what the world might throw at you, you rest safely in the Savior's hand. All of that is true because the Good Shepherd lives for you! Oh, and you will too!

You see, when you discover life in the Good Shepherd, you also discover life eternal. Jesus promises that you won't die. ***"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish"***, literally, "They will never die for eternity." Yes, you'll probably pass through the doorway of physical death, but that's all it is—a doorway. On the other side, you have life without sorrow or worry or tears as we heard in Revelation 7. You can be certain of that, because your Shepherd took his life back up again. When you pass through that doorway of death, your Shepherd will give you a life with him that lasts forever.

"I am Jesus' little lamb..." How comforting to know that that's what you really are! Remember to ever listen to your Shepherd's voice and rest securely in his loving, living hands, where you will remain for eternity. ***"Who so happy as I am, even now the shepherd's lamb? And when my short life is ended, by his angel hosts attended, he shall fold me to his breast, there within his arms to rest."*** Amen.