

John 10: 22-30 On Being Sheep

We have three readings from the lectionary this morning, each of which in some way has a tie to the theme of sheep and shepherds. The image of the Lord as shepherd is prevalent in Scripture long before Jesus begins to use this image. Our call to worship this morning was based on Psalm 23 which most of us have learned sometime in our lives, whether as a Sunday School memory item or because repeated reading of it has brought such comfort to us during our lives. The King James poetical translation which I learned as a child still echoes in my mind. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul. This psalm celebrates Yahweh's claiming of the people of Israel, that the Lord will offer protection and provide for their needs just as a shepherd tends to the flock. It establishes the concept of relationship between the shepherd who is Lord and the people who are the flock. It was written long before the events of our other readings which are from the time of Jesus. When we look at the reading from the Book of Acts we see no direct reference to the images of sheep or shepherds. This passage continues to narrate the story of the developing community which would become the church as they come to understand fully the identity of Jesus Christ. But since it is following our reading last week where Peter was given a commission by the risen Jesus to feed his lambs and tend his sheep, this account tells us how Peter is now fulfilling that role. He is traveling to different villages and offering healing and restoration in Jesus' name. The number of believers belonging to the community is continuing to grow as Jesus' identity as God's anointed is understood. In general the lectionary readings are divided into two broad categories. From when the church's New Year begins until Pentecost, the purpose is to concentrate on the accounts which establish Jesus' identity. Then the readings move on to describing his ministry and teachings. These two groupings are designed around two questions: "Who is Jesus?" and then the follow up question: "What does it mean to follow Jesus?" With that division in mind what purpose does the passage from John's gospel have at this point. On the church calendar we are still in the Sundays of Easter, those forty days after the resurrection when he remained on earth, so why in this reading have we stepped back into an earlier visit to Jerusalem where Jesus' identity was still very much contested? Chapter 10 in John's gospel begins with Jesus' discourse on the Good Shepherd. He defines the attributes that describe the good shepherd and then ends with the declaration: I am the good shepherd. At this point in the narrative according to John, Jesus' pronouncement creates division among those who are listening to him. This morning's text begins by telling us that Jesus is in Jerusalem at the time of the festival of the Dedication. We now know this festival as Hanukkah which does indeed place it as happening during the winter. The further detail is added that Jesus is walking in a specific place within the temple courtyard: the portico of Solomon. The significance of this is that the portico of Solomon is a gate court, a place from which the king would render judgments upon those beseeching his justice. The text does not indicate the time interval from the first part of chapter 10 where Jesus announces that he is the Good Shepherd, but this passage seems connected to the previous chapter and the early part of this one because Jesus' identity is still being questioned and the blindness of those around him is being exposed. Verse 24 of today's text: "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." The purpose of those questioning Jesus at this point is not clear. A

more literal paraphrase of the Greek indicates that the questioner's concerns may be deep. The word for what is being kept in suspense is not a pronoun, but a noun: the noun for life or soul. If their quest to understand Jesus' identity is sincere and they feel essential then what Jesus answers can be disturbing. "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." They have the answer to their question so there is little point in more conversation because those who are a part of Jesus' flock will recognize and follow his voice. Those who are not part of his flock will simply not believe. In our current time, most of us know people who seem to fall into that grouping. If this is the case then we have no obligation to go out spreading the good news which we have received. We can consider ourselves part of the chosen, the flock. However, if we look at this in light of some known psychological findings we can find that superficial reading of the text may be misleading. Studies on human behavior have shown that while we often think that belief shapes our behavior; that is, our actions follow our convictions—the truth may be the opposite. People who act on something, tend to then explain their actions in terms of a conviction. An example in the study was that people were asked their opinions on environmental questions. Following that, they were asked if they would participate in a recycling program. After a month, those who had responded with greater support for their commitment to protecting the environment. Their belief in the cause was increased by their actions. This helps make sense of what Jesus is saying. Yes those who believe in him are part of his flock and follow him. And, at the same time, those who are following him are more likely to believe in him and identify as part of his flock. We tend to separate out "believing" and "following" but it seems according to Jesus and modern psychological studies the two actually go together. Or to put it another way, it's really, really hard to be an armchair Christian. Only by getting out of our chairs—or maybe I should say—by getting out of our pews—and actually living the Christian life do we come to deeper faith and commitment. Jesus told his questioners that he had no further need to tell them who he was because the "works that I do in my Father's name testify to me." Throughout Scripture there is a tension between God's initiative and human responsibility that is never completely resolved. It is only with the eyes of faith that one can see the truth concerning Jesus. Those who belong to Jesus, who hear and recognize his voice and follow him, have been given to him by the Father. If we remember the words of the disciples throughout Jesus' ministry as well as their actions during those last days of Jesus' life, we might wonder whether they belonged to the flock of the good shepherd. But as they followed Jesus and then had encounters with the risen Christ, they fulfilled the commission given to them. It became clear that they could not be snatched away from the flock. Believing and following, following and believing. The promise is that those who belong will be given eternal life by the Good Shepherd, and that no one or nothing will be able to break that bond. In our culture there are many voices which shout loudly. It is sometimes a challenge to listen and discern the voice of our Shepherd in the midst of all the voices that clamor for our attention. We don't always recognize how different they are from the voice of the good shepherd who claims us. Many voices will tell us that we can grow closer to God by having a prescribed religious experience, by believing the correct doctrine, by reaching a higher level of knowledge or a higher level of morality. The Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends upon belonging to him. Never does our status before God depend on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt or

on what we accomplish. It depends upon one thing only: that we are known by the shepherd. But when we follow that voice which claims and calls us our response is to live lives according to what he taught. Like those first disciples who followed when Jesus called, we may not always respond perfectly. Like those first disciples we have been claimed and belong to the flock which Christ gathered despite our shortcomings. As we follow in the path set before us through Jesus' teachings we find our following confirms our believing and our believing strengthens our following. For both, thanks be to God.