

2024 B 4th Sunday of Easter April 21

Our lesson for today is “**The Lord is my Shepherd, and we are God’s sheep.**” Sheep were important for the of ancient Hebrews. That is perhaps why sheep are mentioned more than 500 times in the Bible, more than any animal.

You’re probably not all that familiar with sheep except once in a while petting a sheep in a zoo or in some other places. In any case, you probably wouldn’t think of being described as sheep. Most of us Americans probably prefer to think of ourselves as **lone rangers, or mavericks**, too smart, too free-spirited but not a dumb and stupid sheep who doesn’t think for themselves and ends up in deadly situations.

Yet, when you really get to know a little bit more about sheep, you begin to realize that being a good sheep—that is, **a sheep that sticks with its flock and tries to remain close to the shepherd**—requires some basic qualities that are also essential to being a disciple or true follower of Christ. And, like the disciples of Christ, the sheep benefits greatly from belonging to the flock, gaining safety, guidance, nourishment, correction and care, as well as the opportunity to be useful and productive.

We need to ask ourselves, what does being a good sheep require? Am I in the right flock, obeying the Good Shepherd instead of wandering off on our own or following a stray herd? Let us look at that.

The gospel tells us that Jesus was walking in the Temple area and Jews came up to him and asked, “How Long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly?” Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me,” and so on.

Notice what Jesus says about his flock. First of all, he says that he knows them individually. This is a beautiful **picture of our relationship with God, each of us is known by God.** Jesus says the sheep listen to his voice. The relationship between the sheep and the shepherd is not one-sided.

A man in Australia was arrested sometime back and charged with stealing a sheep. But he protested that he owned the sheep and that it had been missing for many days. When the case went to the court, the judge didn’t know how to decide the matter. Finally, he asked the sheep be brought into the courtroom. Then he ordered the man who accused the other of stealing his sheep, to step outside and call the animal. When he did the sheep made no response except to raise its head and look frightened.

The judge then instructed the accused man to go to the courtyard and call the sheep. When he made a distinctive call, the sheep ran toward the man. It was obvious that the sheep recognized the familiar voice of his master. “His sheep knows him,” said the judge. “Case dismissed!”

It reminds me of somebody I heard saying, “**Listening where love begins** – listening to ourselves, our neighbors, and then to God.” I believe you will agree with me that most of us are great talkers when it comes to devotional life, but poor listeners. **We give God our orders** for the day like in the restaurants, **but we are not reverently listening** to the orders God has for us. Christ says, “He knows his sheep,” but then he adds, “they listen to my voice and follow him.”

In the Eastern world the shepherds like in Biblical times **lead their sheep from in front**. He stands on a rock and watches the sheep while grazing. Then he says a few words and walks away and the sheep follow him. It’s fascinating. Don’t you think that the words of Jesus in the passage suddenly take on a new meaning? “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me?” You can judge whether a person is a disciple of Christ by how well he or she follows. Many of us claim to be belonging to Christ’s flock without taking the responsibility of listening to Christ and following him daily.

There is a beautiful story of a boy, Timmy who was on the verge of death from diphtheria in 1850s on a prairie of the Midwest in late winter still snowing. A circuit riding preacher came by to visit him. The preacher asked Timmy if he knew how to say the Psalm 23. Timmy said, “Yes!” And started reciting the Psalm, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want,” too fast. The preacher decided to teach him how to say the psalm 23 in a different way. He asked him to count the words on his fingers beginning with his thumb. “The Lord is my ...” This way when he uttered the word “my” he would be holding his 4th finger of his hand. The preacher explained, “Your parents wear their wedding rings on the 4th finger of their hands. This is the finger of love. So, if each time Timmy recited the “The Lord is my Shepherd,” when he grabbed the 4th finger, it would be a reminder **that the Lord Jesus is his personal shepherd**. This pleased Timmy and he recited the psalm accordingly. The preacher bid farewell and went on his way.

A few days later, in the morning his mother found Timmy had died. But there was something that caught her eyes extremely strange. She noticed that Timmy was holding on to his 4th finger and her eyes filled up with tears.

You and I know what it meant. “The Lord is my Shepherd.” Or as Jesus said, “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 will snatch them out of my hand.”

Jesus, the Good Shepherd know us by name. We are to listen to his voice and follow him, knowing that he will provide for our every need. And nothing will ever separate us from his love. This is his promise to his people, the sheep of his flock.