

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** John 10:22-30

*At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 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." Jesus answered, "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. My sheep hear 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. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."*

During World War 1, some Turkish soldiers tried to steal a flock of sheep from a hillside in Jerusalem. The shepherd, who had been sleeping, suddenly awakened to see his sheep being driven off on the other side of the ravine. He could not hope to recapture his flock single-handedly by force, but suddenly he had a thought. Standing up on his side of the ravine, he put his hands to his mouth and gave his own peculiar call, which he used each day to gather his sheep to him. The sheep heard the familiar sound. For a moment, they listened and then hearing it again, they turned and rushed down one side of the ravine and up the other toward their shepherd. It was quite impossible for the soldiers to stop the animals. The shepherd went away with them to a place of safety before the soldiers could make up their minds to pursue them – and all because his sheep knew their master's voice.

In today's scripture you heard Jesus say, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." But as I dig deeper into helping us understand what this means for us, I want to offer a bit of a history lesson and some context for the scripture for today. John tells us the date and the place where today's story takes place. The story takes place during the Festival of Dedication, also known as the Festival of Lights or more commonly known today as Hanukkah.

The Festival of Dedication was created in remembrance of a dark time that took great courage for the Jewish people to overcome. The king of Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes, from about the time of 175 to 164 B.C. loved any and everything Greek; and he wanted everyone to get on board with him to embrace all Greek ways, thoughts, and religion. He sought to eliminate the Jewish religion, at first, through peaceful—even subliminal—methods. Some of the Jews embraced these new ideas, but most refused to let go of their faith in God that had been passed on to them.

Eventually, the king got ferocious with his efforts, sending soldiers into Jerusalem, murdering many Jews and selling many others as slaves. The temple was invaded and desecrated, and the Temple treasury was robbed. The altar was used to offer pigs as a sacrifice to the Greek gods. It became a capital offence to possess a copy of the Jewish law and to have male babies circumcised. Any mother who had her son circumcised was crucified with her child hanging from her neck. The king threw everything he could at the Jews, making life absolutely miserable, to get them to give up their faith. Some did exactly that.

But then, Judas Maccabaeus and his brother came forward to fight for their freedom and in 164 B.C., and they won the battle. The Temple was cleansed and purified. The altar was rebuilt, and the robes and utensils were replaced after being contaminated for three years by the king. The Feast of the Dedication was created to honor the purification of the temple for years to come.

There is more to the story of Hanukkah, but for our purposes today, I'm going to stop here, because the point I want us to hear from this bit of history, is that for a time, when the king of Syria sought to rid the world of the Jewish faith, there were those who seemed to allow themselves to be snatched away from their faith in God. They lost sight of God, almost as if God didn't ever exist, and they succumbed to the will of the king. Maybe it was just easier for them to do that than to fight the battle against the king. Or maybe, they never were truly faithful. They did what some people would do today. The wisdom of the Bible is relevant for all times.

Jumping forward to today's scripture, John tells us that Jesus was at Solomon's Porch on a wintry day. This was a special area of the Temple where people walked to pray and meditate. Rabbis strolled along the column-lined porch while teaching their students. Jesus was there teaching, too. His teachings and popularity were not looked upon too kindly by most of the Temple officials.

This is where the key question for the people listening was presented to Jesus, "Tell us Jesus, in plain and simple terms, are you the Messiah?" Certainly, everyone's attention was focused on Jesus for the answer. There were those who genuinely wanted to know if this was true, but there were others, like the Temple officials, who wanted to trap him into saying something that they could twist into a charge of blasphemy and get rid of him. I can picture people, sitting on the edge of their seats, so to speak, listening intently for Jesus' answer.

He answered saying, "I already told you, but you don't believe." But did he? Did he really tell them? In John's gospel, we don't hear Jesus make any sort of announcement except privately and twice: once to the Samaritan woman at the well and again to the blind man he healed prior to this event. Otherwise, as Jesus said here, he should have been known as the Messiah through "The works that I do in my Father's name..." He went on to say that they did not believe he is the Messiah because "you are not my sheep."

Sheep? What did he mean? If we look back to the beginning of Chapter 10, we find Jesus having a discussion with the Pharisees using a familiar Old Testament analogy of the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. Jesus makes the claim to be the Good Shepherd.

Sheep are not known to be the smartest animal on the planet, but they are wise enough to know the voice of their shepherd—the one who takes care of them, the one who leads them and who goes looking for them when they wander off. Sometimes, they do wander off and get themselves lost and in trouble. They know their shepherd. They know his particular voice and they follow him when they listen.

In order for a shepherd to be a shepherd, he needs some sheep and the sheep in this analogy, when he was speaking at that moment, were those who were listening; but as Jesus points out here not everyone who was listening was in his flock. They didn't know him as their Shepherd. Why? Jesus said they did not recognize him as their Shepherd—their Messiah—because they did not know God, who lived through him, even though God revealed himself through the marvelous words and works of Jesus.

Like some of their ancestors—that I spoke of earlier in this message—who were snatched up by the insistence and persuasion of a king to abandon their faith and convert to false teachings, some of those listening to Jesus that day may have been snatched up by the lies of those jealous of Jesus' popularity or by their traditional beliefs of what the Messiah would do for them. Jesus said that those sheep who really know the Good Shepherd will never be snatched from him.

If you have been sticking with me, there is a good chance you have already begun to put some of the pieces together for valuable lessons offered to us through God's Holy Word. We

hear that Jesus is our Good Shepherd and we are his sheep, yet not everyone knows him because they do not believe in him. They do not know his voice and follow him. Instead, they listen to other voices and follow those voices; in essence, they are snatched from him by their own doing but not the Shepherd's. They, for whatever reason, don't want to hear the Shepherd's voice.

A man was heard making this confession. Every once in a while, my daughter starts crying. From then on in, the battle begins. My wife and I have an ignorance contest. Who can lay the stillest for the longest without getting up? The trick to winning this battle is to learn how to tune it out. If I can somehow stay in a sort of semi-consciousness without really waking up, then after a while my wife will finally get up, and I'll be able to fall back asleep which is where I wanted to be in the first place. Then, I'll wake up the next morning and ask my wife innocently, "Did Maia get up last night?" After she says yes, I respond, "I thought I heard something, but I didn't realize it until you got up." The reality is that I have learned how to tune it out, because I didn't want to hear it; so even when I did hear her, I didn't listen.

That's how some people all too often respond to the voice of the Good Shepherd. They'll listen when it's convenient. They will listen when they have the energy. They'll listen when they want to. But when the Good Shepherd tries to tell them something that they don't want to hear—that they don't want to believe—then they somehow train themselves to sleepwalk through it as if Jesus never said it, or as if the Good Shepherd really wasn't talking to them. They would rather listen to other voices saying what they want to hear, leading them to places where they want to be, risking their souls of possibly being snatched away from the hand of the Good Shepherd.

Let us not misunderstand Jesus when he says **his** sheep will never be snatched away from him. He is not saying that we will never experience hardships, failures and pain. But like a good shepherd, he will look for his lost sheep, guide them back to the flock when they respond to his voice, and he even carries the injured. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep. He knows us very well, and he loves us in spite of our imperfections and failures. Ultimately, like a good shepherd, he has already saved us from utter destruction by dying for our sin and making it possible for us to live in his glorious flock for all eternity.

It's also important to hear Jesus telling us that faith is required for us to recognize and hear his voice. Without faith we can easily be swayed to follow the loud voices based on other ideals, principles, and values that block out the voice of Jesus. Without faith, the discouragement and frustration we may feel when the questions for which we seek answers seem to have no answers can overcome us with hopelessness.

Faith when dark thoughts and events seem to be prevailing in and around us helps us hear the voice of Jesus, calling us and leading us to the peace and hope we can find only in him. The power of faith is greater than the vulnerabilities that may be perceived by those seeking and finding tangible temporary satisfaction through the fallen world's ideals. It is with faith that we hear Jesus calling us and we pursue him where we are brought into the glorious love and security of the presence of God.

I know this is something I surely want every day of my life. There are a lot of things I don't understand that are happening in our world—both near and far. It terrifies me sometimes to think that evil seems to have the upper hand in controlling events that are destroying people's lives, and some are done under the guise of religion. Some Christians have become disillusioned, cowering behind their fear, embracing the easier road travelled and, thereby, allowing the world to fall into deeper darkness. With faith, we hear the Shepherd's voice and are led away from participating in those activities.

The other interesting point I see here is that when Jesus talks about sheep, he doesn't talk about one. We hear him talk about sheep as "they," not he or she, but "they." Sheep are not often found alone, but in groups. A sheep that is alone is very vulnerable. Sheep have very little ability to defend themselves, even when compared with other species preyed upon that are kept as livestock. Even if sheep are not directly bitten or if they survive an attack, they may die from panic or from injuries sustained.

Christians need each other. We are less vulnerable to being led astray from Jesus when we have each other—our family of faith. But then again the family needs to know the Good Shepherd.

As we learn from today's scripture, there were those around Jesus that day, claiming to believe in God but did not know the voice of the Shepherd—the religious leaders with good intentions. These were men, primarily, who knew the law and who sought to do everything possible to make people follow in accordance with that law. These men lost their way and were unable to recognize the Messiah standing right in front of them. Their worship and focus was not on God, but instead on the law and their own pride.

There are churches like that today—churches who make it a priority to follow the human-made rules of the church without exception. There are churches focused more on making a good presentation through programs and worship than on the purpose for having successful programs and meaningful worship. There are churches too focused on their disagreements than on what brings them together—Jesus, who is the common bond that makes it possible to live in harmony with one another.

Congregations led by the Good Shepherd are different, beginning with the individual hearts of the believers hungry for a relationship with Jesus and a relationship with other believers. With commitment to one another, the flock follows the Good Shepherd. With openness to learn, they seek to understand the Word through study and dialogue.

Guided and motivated by the Good Shepherd, they step out in faith even when it seems risky or uncomfortable to follow Him to serve others. The flock prays together and supports one another as they patiently wait upon the Lord for a response—no matter how long it takes or even when it seems God is not giving an answer. Yes, the sheep of the Good Shepherd's flock stick together for the glory of God manifested together and for all humankind to witness. We—you and I—need each other as we follow Jesus.

The Lord is my shepherd. Does that ring true for you? I hope so, because as the Bible reveals to us, not much has changed over the course of history. There are and will be events, people, and ideals always trying to snatch us from the hand of the Good Shepherd. Some of this stuff is pretty darn persuasive and even powerful. But with our faithful hearts set on the Good Shepherd, we will not be snatched away. Instead, we will follow his voice throughout this lifetime, leading us into eternity with him.