

JOHN 10:22–30. (EHV)

Then the Festival of Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple area in Solomon's Colonnade. So the Jews gathered around Jesus, asking, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, **"I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I am doing in my Father's name testify about me. But you do not believe, because you are not my sheep, as I said to you. 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. 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."**

Perhaps no metaphor depicting the relationship between Jesus and his followers is more endearing than that of Jesus as the shepherd and his followers as his sheep. There are, for instance, many paintings and prints similar to today's bulletin cover hanging up in the homes of Christians and in Christian churches. In an archeological site in modern-day Syria, identified as the earliest known Christian house church, dating to the early to mid-200s AD, the walls of the house church had several frescoes. And guess what one of the paintings was? A shepherd holding a sheep around his neck.

This morning we are going to examine this metaphor more closely by listening to what Jesus says about his sheep.

1. They Are Sheep

First, Jesus does call his followers his sheep. Even though we view it as a tender and endearing metaphor, it's not exactly flattering that Jesus compares us to sheep. Sheep are needy, weak, defenseless animals, who are prone to stray and get themselves into trouble. There is a video clip on YouTube of a sheep stuck headfirst in a narrow trench along a road. A young man gently pulls it out by its back leg. It immediately proceeds to take about five bounds forward, then leaps into the air and dives headlong right back into the trench about ten to fifteen yards ahead. Their survival does not depend on their size, hunting prowess, intelligence, or ability to defend themselves. They can maybe give a little head butt, but that isn't too effective against their predators. Really, the only thing they can do in danger is to bleat, which can make things worse if the wolf or other predator didn't know exactly where they were. "Where's dinner?" "Baaa!" "Ah, there it is." Not to mention, if sheep are left to themselves, they will continue to grow wool until it causes mobility problems, overheating, and health problems like maggot infestation.

Domestic sheep can only survive under and are completely dependent on the care of a shepherd. But that's exactly Jesus's point. Our existence is a miserable one on our own. We need Jesus to lead, guide, and care for us.

2. They Are Led by Jesus's Voice

And how does Jesus lead and guide us? With his voice. With his word. "My sheep hear my voice." The voice is what establishes a relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. It isn't just the distinctive way the shepherd calls his sheep, but also the tone and cadence of his voice. A stranger could use the exact same call and the sheep wouldn't budge, because they wouldn't

recognize his voice. When sheep are purchased and transplanted from one herd to another, they have to go through a period of traumatic stress and therapy while they learn to recognize their new shepherd's voice, because the shepherd's voice is what they live by.

In the case of Jesus's sheep, listening doesn't just mean recognizing. It also means believing. The Jewish leaders asked Jesus, "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." And Jesus answered them, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I am doing in my Father's name testify about me. But you do not believe, because you are not my sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear my voice." Jesus's voice is the only voice his sheep trust without question.

This is a good test for us as we think about the kind of sheep we are in Jesus's sheep pen. I remember a college classmate of mine lamenting how many 1980s songs he had memorized compared to how many hymns or Bible passages he had memorized. He recognized that there were other voices competing for his attention, and too often he was giving their voices more attention than he gave Jesus's voice.

What about us? Whose voice or voices do we give the most attention to? Whose voice or voices do we trust without question? How often do we read or listen to the news, and just take its perspective as gospel truth, without considering what Jesus has to say? How often don't we judge what a religious organization or church body teaches, maybe even our own church body, on the basis of what our friends and the world around us tell us, rather than on the basis of what Jesus tells us? How often don't we even judge or interpret something we hear in the Bible based on what the media or popular opinion tells us? "This must mean that, because certainly Jesus couldn't mean what it actually says. That would be too backwards and out of touch." That's the same reaction the Jewish leaders had to Jesus's word. He had told them he was the Christ or Messiah, but they didn't believe what he said.

Jesus's sheep hear his voice. They trust him absolutely. They believe what he tells them.

3. They Have the Best Shepherd

But how did we come to recognize Jesus's voice and believe it? Jesus says, "I know [my sheep], and they follow me." The apostle Paul tells us that this knowing stretches back to eternity. He writes in Romans Chapter 8 that those God foreknew, or knew in advance, he predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son. So clearly this is a special kind of knowing, a knowing that has an effect on the one who is known, a knowing that establishes a relationship with the one who is known. Jesus knew all his sheep from eternity, and then, when we actually came into existence, when the time was right, he used his voice to activate his knowledge, so to speak. We love because he first loved us. We know him and his voice, because he first knew us from eternity. We recognize and trust his voice, because his voice changed our hearts and taught us to recognize and trust him. That is why we follow him.

Imagine a rancher who not only knows each of the cattle in the herd he has now, and has names for all of them, but also knows all the cattle he will ever own, and has names for all of them too. That's Jesus's relationship with his sheep. He knew them in advance. He knows them now. He knows them inside and out. He knows exactly who each of them is and what each of them needs. In other words, Jesus's sheep have the best possible shepherd.

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4. They Have Eternal Life

That leads nicely to the last point Jesus makes here, when he tells us where his knowledge of his sheep is leading them. We already heard Paul say: “Those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.” In other words, in eternity God didn’t just pick us to belong to his herd, he also destined us for a purpose—eternal glory.

Jesus says that here too: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.” Sometimes if you look at certain sheep in Jesus’s sheep pen, it might seem like he’s not feeding or caring for them that well. They struggle against this sin or that, and keep having relapses. They’re having difficulties paying the bills. Their personal life is a mess. They’re constantly making trips to the hospital, and so on. It’s important to note, then, that the purpose for which Jesus is raising and caring for his sheep is not a successful life on earth by the world’s standards. No, Jesus is raising and caring for us to give us eternal life.

And since he has known us from eternity and destined us for eternal life, no one is going to snatch his sheep out of his hand. But wait, doesn’t Jesus warn us elsewhere that, if we think we are standing firm, we should be careful lest we fall? Yes, and when we are smug and proud and self-secure, Jesus directs us to those passages. But that is not his message here.

Jesus is preaching here, first, to his enemies, trying to woo them to listen to him by showing them the wonderful blessings that come when people believe in him and become sheep in his sheep pen. And he is preaching, second, to us believers who are aware of the number of our enemies, physical and spiritual, and their ferocity and burning desire to snatch us out of Christ’s sheep pen. And Jesus puts those concerns to rest here: “No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

If you are listening to Jesus, if you believe in Jesus, if you belong to Jesus, you are completely safe. Because, as Jesus explains, his sheep pen is his hand, and if you are in his hand, then you are in God the Father’s hand, because he and the Father are one. And no one is stronger or greater than God. No one can pry God’s fingers open and break into his sheep pen.

Jesus’s sheep *are* sheep. But they are sheep led by Jesus’s voice, the voice of the best possible shepherd who has known them from eternity, the voice of the shepherd who gives them eternal life. No one will snatch them out of his hand. Amen.