

## **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (2014)**

**Gospel: John 10:1-10**

**Sermon: "I Don't Wanna Be A Sheep"**

The truth is I do not know anything about sheep. I grew up in New Jersey – really what could I possibly know about sheep. But, I do have a picture in my head of a soft, white, cuddly lamb – which is why - to this day – I just can not bring myself to eat lamb chops!

But - there is a fun children's song that is used often at camp or Vacation Bible School. Maybe you know this song. The chorus contains these words: "I just wanna be a sheep; Baa, baa, baa, baa; I just wanna be a sheep; Baa, baa, baa, baa; I pray the Lord my soul to keep; I just wanna be a sheep; Baa, baa, baa, baa." And it goes on from there into a series of verses that you really don't want to be – like a goat or a hypocrite.

I served a congregation in Wisconsin where sheep ranching was pretty common. I will always remember the day that Pastor Julie gave the sermon on Good Shepherd Sunday. She talked about sheep a lot – what they were really like – what they looked like, what they smelled like, what they acted like. And, she talked about us – how all of us are often like sheep. As I was leaving the worship space, I noticed that Pastor Julie had been backed up against the wall by a very large forbidding man. Now, Pastor Julie measure about 5 foot nothing. The man towered over her. He was shaking his finger in her face and yelling loud enough for everyone to hear. "Sheep are NOT anything like you talked about!" He screamed. "I should know I have a ranch full of them! You know NOTHING about sheep and even LESS about people!" He stormed off. It did not end there. He sent a letter to the Church Council – to the Bishop. Ultimately, he took his family and left the church. It was very ugly.

This scene has played itself over and over in my mind as I read the Gospel for today. And, it hit me – I finally understood – what that sheep rancher was really screaming about – what he really feared. He didn't want to be a sheep! And, I get it – I really don't want to be a sheep either. We are a people who cherish the fact we have control over own lives. Just ask our graduating seniors – they are chomping at the bit – to get out on their own – to make their own decisions – to be free of authority and rules – to do what they want. In America we like to say

that everyone has the opportunity to be who they want here – all you have to do is work hard and it will all come to you. Yep, I don't want to be a sheep either.

Because you see – those real sheep can often be very stubborn. Sheep can be so very sure of themselves – that they wander away from the entire flock of sheep. They wander away from their protector – the shepherd. And, suddenly the sheep are lost. And, they are so very surprised that they are lost. How did that happen to me? – they wonder. In addition, sheep have predators – wolves that are waiting to attack them for sport or for food. There are also plenty of thieves who are seeking to snatch the sheep away from their families and adding them to their own flock. It is all so confusing – and scary – and real.

Hey, wait a minute ... maybe that is me – maybe that is us. Maybe we are the sheep. It seems we are more stubborn than we want to admit. We easily get sidetracked – by school and jobs and money and stuff. It is easy to wander away from the community we call the church and Jesus – the Great Shepherd. We do not even realize how quickly we have neglected worship and prayer and scripture and devotions. And, suddenly – surprisingly – we are alone, outside. It is darker than we remembered – lonelier, colder, and scarier. And look, here come the wolves of materialism and greed to feed on our fears. And now, the thieves approach offering us happiness if only we will follow them. And sometimes, we do. Yep, despite all our screaming – we really are sheep.

But wait, there is good news. Thank God – there is good news! And the good news is that in a few splashes of water at our baptism – we became children of God. And we got ourselves a Good Shepherd. His name is Jesus. No matter if we have strayed through neglect or stubbornness. No matter if we have been tricked by wolves or wandered off with thieves. No matter what – we can be assured that we still belong to Jesus – the true Shepherd. He knows us intimately – our fears, our insecurities, our inadequacies. He loves us anyway. In baptism He has called us by name. We are His. We can follow His voice and He will lead us. We will not be abandoned – ever, no matter what happens.

Not only is Jesus the Shepherd. He also says, "I am the Gate." To this day, in the fields of countries in the Middle East – actual human shepherds will lay down to sleep at the opening of the sheep enclosure. The only way a sheep can get out or a wolf can get in is to literally walk over the body of the shepherd. This image

of protection can be seen in the doorways of medieval churches. If you come and visit the Chapel in the Hills in Rapid City – which is an exact replica of a Norwegian stave church – you will see at the doorway elaborate wood carvings of dragons and snakes that signify protection. It means that when you enter this community of faith you are within the body of Christ. Jesus protects and provides for us – His sheep.

In fact, Jesus makes a bold promise in our Gospel reading. He promises that He is the gate to eternal life. Jesus' words in verse 10 are: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." In Greek "to have it abundantly" actually means to have a "superabundance of a thing." To be a follower of Jesus is to have a superabundance of life! All because we walk with Jesus....

Which reminds me of the last verse of the "I Just Wanna Be A Sheep" song I mentioned earlier. Do you remember how it goes? "Just wanna be a child of God, Just wanna be a child of God, Walkin' the same path He trod, Just wanna be a child of God." Baa, Baa, Baa, Baa. Amen.