Fourth Sunday of Easter
John 10:11-18
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This week our reading takes us back before Christ’s crucifixion. He had just healed a blind man and is speaking to the Pharisee’s and the Jews. Jesus is telling them that He is the good shepherd and would lay down His life for His sheep. That is a very deep and powerful statement from the Gospel today but before that reading we also heard Psalm 23. The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. We have turned to Psalm 23 in our times of discomfort and uncertainty; looking for Christ through the Psalm, knowing He is our good shepherd and that He is with us, whom then shall we fear. The Psalm is beautiful, simple, and comforting.

We look for comfort in these days of uncertainty about our jobs, our income, and our health. Who does not need to know that there is a shepherd caring for us? Who does not want to hear a familiar voice at church and be surrounded by caring people? But then we look at our Gospel reading and our comfort is threatened. There is a dark side to our reading; there are others out there that do not care about us. Jesus’ tells us that the hired hand that is supposed to be watching out for the sheep runs away in time of danger because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. There is a predator out there prowling and salivating, wanting to get at the sheep; here we are starting to go from being taken care by shepherd to a level of danger.

We do not get to meet the wolf in this reading, who is he? Why is he after these sheep? What interest does he have in their death? The text leaves his face in the shadows; he is never named. This means his identity is open-ended; the predator can be anything threatening.

They may have identified the predator differently back when Jesus first said these words, but we have our own predators to deal with today. We have issues that threaten us, even to the point of destruction and for some of us it is fear.

• What is going to happen with our future security?
• Will I possibly be laid off?
• How long will my health hold up?
• Where will I go when I can no longer live independently?
• Will my kids be OK?
• Will the world be safe for my grandkids?

Fear itself, anxiety, stress and uncertainty make all of the issues we face all the more dangerous. A swimmer in trouble is in worse danger when he panics; fear is destructive; a dangerous wolf.

This is why the Shepherd's words are so important "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." The Good Shepherd cares about every issue we struggle with; without exception, to the point of His own life.
Jesus could have left Gethsemane that night before Judas and the crowd came to arrest Him. He could have called on 10,000 angels to beat back the soldiers, but Jesus is the good shepherd. It is He who dies rather than the disciples, the soldiers, or the people. He lays down His life for His sheep.

Charles Dickens's "Tale of Two Cities" presents a classic illustration of this. Set during the French Revolution, it is the story of two friends, Charles Damay and Sydney Carton. Damay is a young Frenchman who has been thrown in a dungeon to await the guillotine. Carton is a wasted English lawyer whose life has been one of careless a lifestyle.

In a beautiful allegory of Christ's atonement for us, Carton slips into the dungeon and exchanges clothes with the prisoner, allowing Damay to escape. The next morning, Sydney Carton makes his way up the steps that lead to the guillotine.

This is the sort of love Jesus shows as the good shepherd. He takes our place. He lays down His life for the sheep; we do not need to fear. So if we want to let go of our fears the question I want to ask us is how well do we know our Shepherd and how can we get to know Him better? If one of the dangerous and destructive "wolves" we face is fear, how are we going to follow our Shepherd as He leads us through difficult times? The answer is in this text too: we know our Shepherd's voice, Jesus says they will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Where Jesus lived they have what is called a sheep fold; the enclosure in which several different flocks spend the night in safety. In the morning the shepherds have no problem sorting them out because they simply go out and give the call that their own sheep recognize and follow. The sheep know the shepherd's voice, and follow.

So how does that work for us today, how do we recognize the Shepherd's voice? It's an important issue for us because there are lots of alternative voices claiming shepherd-status out there today; which do we listen to?

I feel that hearing Christ's voice for one hour a week is not enough; there are simply too many other voices out there constantly sending us messages all day, every day; I do not believe we will be as discerning of the Shepherd's voice as we need to be to keep the wolves away if we only give Him one or two hours a week here in church.

Here are some of the ways we can hear Jesus' voice in our daily lives and know it is His. We look carefully and seriously at the scriptures and ask for the Holy Spirit to help us understand. We read about Jesus, learn from His teachings, observe Him in action with the disciples, observe how He treated people, who caught His attention, and the way He responded to people around Him. In doing this we can take what we have learned out into the world and be able to recognize His voice in a crowd.

One of the ways for me to listen for God's voice in the middle of my busy schedule is to
take some time alone and listen as God tells me to be still and know that He is God. It is good to take time alone with God to just listen, you don't have to do the talking just the listening, it is amazing what you might hear. This really helps me with my spiritual life. It is important to take the time to listen and learn the Shepherd's voice when everything and everyone else seems to be calling you.

Mother Teresa said that the poor, the homeless, the unwanted is Jesus in disguise. May we not miss that chance to hear Him and see Him in their eyes and their smiles?

Jesus is our Good Shepherd; He laid down His life for us, He tells us that He laid it down and He can take it up again, no one takes it from Him but He lays it down of His own accord. Just think how much He loves and cares for us, He knows us just like His Father knows Him, He will never let us go so whom then shall we fear?

So let us take the time out of our busy days to get to know Him, learn His voice, take the quiet moments, spend them with Him, and listen for His whisper when the world is loud.
