

John 10:1-10

Children are doing fairly well these days in avoiding strangers. They do not get into a car with a stranger. They walk away when the door is opened to them. They even run when they have to. This does not come naturally. It must be taught to children, and it is being taught. Many children, therefore, have been kept safe through diligent teaching on the part of their parents.

When Jesus says that His sheep will not follow a stranger, but will flee from him, this, too, does not come naturally. Jesus' sheep must be taught the same way that children are taught.

The word for stranger in the Greek is also a word for enemy. A sheep has many enemies but only one shepherd. Wolves, lions, bears...these and other predators are enemies of sheep. These seek the sheep only to steal, kill, and devour. A sheep will be kept safe from these enemies, but only if it learns to follow nothing except its shepherd.

You are Jesus' sheep. He is your Shepherd, and there is no other. As with sheep in general, you have one shepherd, but many enemies. You and I do not have natural knowledge of our enemies. We are not born with the awareness of who we should follow, and from whom we should flee. In fact, we are born, says the Bible, enemies of God. We come into this world seeing Jesus as a stranger, but seeing those who would kill and devour us as friends. We are born ignorant; stupid, we can say; blind sheep who follow anyone and everyone.

But Jesus does not leave you this way. He is no stranger, but truly is your Friend and Shepherd. And so in Holy Baptism your Shepherd called to you. He drew you to Himself as one of His sheep. He didn't say, "Hey you! Come here!" He called you by name. Your name was spoken by the lips of your pastor - the mouth of Christ - as the water and Word were applied to you. And so you are now part of Jesus' flock. But He doesn't know you as just someone in His flock. He knows you personally. He loves you intimately. Each one of you is so very dear to Him.

How can we know all this for certain? For when I look at myself, at my misspent years, I must confess that I'm not sure why Jesus would want me as a sheep. Friend, Jesus does not call the best and brightest. He does not call those who have kept their noses clean. He baptizes sinners. He loves the ungodly. He forgives the worst of the worst.

Does this make sense to you? It didn't to the people Jesus was speaking to in our text. "*They didn't understand,*" it says, "*what He was saying to them.*" Why didn't they understand? Very simply because they were not His sheep. Jesus' sheep do not grasp everything He says. But they know His voice, and so they trust what He says even if they do not understand it.

Not all are Jesus' sheep. Not all love to hear His voice. Not all come when He calls. But you are the baptized. You come here where your Shepherd speaks to you. You are Jesus' sheep. You are His sheep not because you think you are, or feel that you are, but because Jesus names you as His sheep in the waters of Baptism, and this you believe in your heart by His grace.

Your Shepherd calls you and you follow Him. He does not drive you from behind. He leads the way before you our text says. A driver of sheep uses force. One who leads sheep calls to them.

And because He leads us, He chooses the way we will go. This way is not always pleasant, but it is the best way. The way our Shepherd leads is always through times of temptation. But it is precisely when His sheep are tempted, and tempted severely, that they listen better to His voice.

Little sheep - our lambs among us - are to be immersed into the voice of Jesus. Parents are required by God to teach them Jesus' loving voice in the home, and to bring them to Jesus' house where, in Sunday School and in the Divine Service, these precious lambs learn well the voice of their Shepherd.

This teaching and learning does not end at a certain age. For if it does come to an end, the sheep will quickly forget the voice of their Shepherd and will follow the voice of strangers.

This is why He leads us through temptation and affliction. When life is good, what need do sheep have to listen to their Shepherd? This is how we are and how we think. So Jesus calls us to follow Him into the pasture along paths we would not choose for ourself. But it must be this way. The only way in which we sheep will continue to follow our Shepherd, by continuing to listen to His voice, is when life is not all that good; when we hear the wolves howling around us.

If you are a sheep who has been wounded, scared, tempted severely, even downright crushed, this is Jesus showing mercy to you. He is helping you to listen better to His voice through what has afflicted you.

He knows affliction well. He's been there. He knows temptation well. He Himself was wounded and crushed severely. Jesus was the Lamb who fell prey to the enemy. Not because He wasn't listening to the voice of His Father, but because He did listen to His voice. Jesus was led like a sacrificial lamb to the altar of the cross to be devoured by the enemy. He was swallowed up by death. But death could not hold Him. He burst from the belly of death, ripping a gaping hole into this dread enemy.

His Father led Him into the dark valley and back out of it so that we are led in the same way. Jesus knows the way through the valley. He was there. No stranger knows the way. But Jesus does. He is the way.

The green pastures are prepared for you who are Jesus' sheep. Right now you feed in these pastures as you are listening to the voice of your Shepherd. You have life now in Him, and abundant life awaits you in heaven. Your enemies are against you all the way, but following Jesus, they cannot overpower you. Your sin is forgiven no matter how dark your past; no matter how much a black sheep you have been. Death is but a sleep because Jesus ripped a gaping hole in it for you. Hell cannot have you for you are Jesus' sheep. You belong to Him forever.

Dear sheep, do not take all this for granted. Make your salvation certain. Learn, and keep learning, the voice of your Shepherd. You cannot learn it well enough. You have many enemies. Many strange voices call to you. But you have one Shepherd. He is the One who loves you and forgives you. In Him you have life, and have it abundantly. Amen.