

John 10:1-10

It's a tough world out there for a sheep, and it seems to be getting tougher every day. I'm not speaking of viruses and disease, crime and corruption. Everyone deals with these troubles, not just sheep. Sheep have it tougher because they are the favorite targets of thieves and robbers. Jesus says this in our text. "*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.*"

The thief is after the sheep. Why? Because the sheep belong to Jesus. A thief does not steal from what already belongs to him. He robs from what belongs to someone else. It is the devil's nature to try, with all his might, and cleverness, and deceitfulness, to take from Jesus His beloved sheep.

Are you one of His sheep? Do not look for the answer to this question in your own heart. Do not look at how you have behaved in life to answer this question. Look only to what Jesus says. "*The sheep hear the (shepherd's) voice,*" says Jesus, "*and he calls his own sheep by name.*" In your baptism Jesus called you by name. This is where you heard His voice. Your baptism into Christ identifies you as Jesus' beloved sheep. And because you are His sheep, the thief has targeted you. Is this reason to worry and be afraid? No. Remember to whom you belong.

Jesus' sheep, says our text, are kept in a sheepfold. We do not see these in our own country. In the Holy Land, sheep were placed within a walled enclosure at night. The walls were very high and were usually topped with sharp objects. Not to keep the sheep in; to keep thieves out. The only way into the sheepfold was through the door. This was a narrow opening within one of the walls. The gatekeeper would have to turn sideways in order to let the sheep in and out.

Now, many sheep of different shepherds would all be placed into the sheepfold in the Holy Land. When the shepherd came to lead out his sheep, he would call out and his own sheep would come to him, for his voice they recognized. If a different shepherd came and called, these same sheep would not come to him, for his voice they did not recognize, but this shepherd would be a stranger to them. Now we should know that in the Greek language, the word for stranger is also a word for enemy.

A few months ago, my wife went to visit our grandson in Ohio. At the door stood our son with our grandson. He was too young to recognize my wife. And what he did was to look at his daddy to see if the woman standing at the door was a friend or a stranger. After seeing how his daddy welcomed this woman and was comfortable with her, our little grandson also accepted her.

Our son was the gatekeeper for his little child. What a privilege, and what a responsibility. And this extends far beyond the front door of the house. Christian parents are gatekeepers for their little ones because their little ones are Jesus' own sheep. When Jesus the Good Shepherd calls out to lead His sheep to the pasture, the parents go with their children, yes indeed, but they also are responsible for making sure that it is Jesus who is calling out.

Parents, this means that we must know the voice of Jesus well. And how can we if we do not regularly hear and read the Scriptures? If we do not know well the voice of the Good Shepherd, we can be letting in thieves and robbers without even being aware of it.

Jesus' pastors are gatekeepers. They are to study well the Holy Scriptures so that in their preaching and teaching, Jesus' sheep learn to recognize His voice, love His voice, and follow His voice.

Jesus' voice is one of authority, but not one of harsh command. He does not drive His sheep from behind with the Law. "*He goes before them,*" Jesus says in our text, as the Gospel itself. Jesus does the leading, the acting, the work. The verbs all belong to Him. Baptism belongs to Jesus. It is His gracious work for you. Salvation belongs to Jesus. It is His gift that He earned for you.

The thief places these verbs with you and not with Jesus. The thief tells you that baptism is your work; that the Holy Supper is a command for you to obey; that salvation itself must be claimed by you, and not freely given to you by grace alone. The thief is deceptive. He, or she, seems so sincere, so caring, and seems to know the Bible well. Keep in mind that no one knows the Scriptures better than the devil, except for God alone.

"*I am determined,*" writes St. Paul, "*to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.*" There is only one way to understand the Bible. Through the cross of Christ. "*I am the door.*" In the Middle Ages the Carpenter's Guild selected these words of Jesus as their motto. They, then, deliberately built the cross into every door they constructed. Look at the doors in your house. Some of them are still built this way, made up of four panels with the cross at the center.

This is how you know the voice of Jesus. This is how He leads you in and out. This is how He gives you life abundantly. By His sacrificial death on the cross for you. All of Scripture proclaims His cross; it is at the center of everything. Your baptism places His cross upon you. By His death on the cross you are assured that your sins are forgiven. Yes, you. Your Good Shepherd's voice tells you, sinful sheep that you are, that you are forgiven of all your sins. The thief does not give Jesus' forgiveness to you. Do not listen to the thief. He is a stranger. He is your enemy. But Jesus is no stranger. He is your Shepherd, and you are His beloved sheep. Amen.