

John 10-22-30

Easter 4; May 8 & 9, 2022

For the last number of years, there has been a duck that has built a nest and laid her eggs in the courtyard here at church. It is an outdoor space that is completely surrounded by the walls of the school and the church. In many ways, it is a space that is very well protected. Recently the little ducks were born. Last week, as I looked out my office window, I watched them for a while. You could immediately see the special relationship that the ducklings had with their mother. When the mother called, the ducklings would come from wherever they were to line up behind mom. Sometimes, mom would fly away to get food for them. When she came back, they all came toward her. Other times, mom would fly off only to sit up on the roof. As the ducklings moved around in the courtyard, mom would move along the roof so that she could see her babies. You could tell that she was protecting them. At times, I don't think the ducklings were aware that mom was up on the roof watching their every move.

In some ways, that mother and her ducks were like the picture of a shepherd and his sheep in the times of Jesus. I'm not sure we fully understand the role of a shepherd in biblical times. Today, at least in this part of the world, the shepherds would lead their sheep into fenced in and green grass fields, and let them eat. But in the area of Israel the patches were sparsely spread in open country. For that reason, shepherds were indispensable. Those shepherds protected, led, guided and cared for his sheep. Often the only thing that stood between the sheep and death was the shepherd. It is a picture that the Bible uses again and again to describe the work of the Messiah. The only thing standing between the sheep, us, and eternal death was the Good Shepherd. On another occasion in the verses just before our text Jesus had clearly stated that. **"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."**

As we find Jesus walking through the temple during this festival, he saw that the Jewish leaders were not very good shepherds leading their people. Jesus wanted people to depend on him the way sheep depend on their shepherd. Instead of listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd, all the Jewish leaders that were that day wanted to do is to find a way to twist Jesus' word around so the people would stop believing that he was the Messiah. These were people who wanted to kill him. **"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."**

I dare you. I double dare you. I triple dare you. Do those words bring back any memories from your childhood? Were you being challenged or coerced to do something you really didn't want to do? Were you challenged to say something you really didn't want to say? Maybe it was something that you knew would get you into trouble? Did you give in? Did you wish you didn't give in? Or did you refuse the dare in spite of the things people said to you? Most of us have probably been in that situation at least one time or another. When those words were spoken, they were not spoken because someone wanted to see if you had the ability to do something. They were spoken to see you get in trouble.

They gather around him not as friends but as vicious wolves who want to destroy the Shepherd who has come to save them. They wanted Jesus to tell them whether he was the Christ or the Messiah so they would have the evidence they need to put him to death. Yet, there is something amazing happening in the temple that day. It is amazing to see how much Jesus still loved the people who hated him. He wants them to be his sheep and come under his care and be dependent on him. Jesus doesn't walk away or tell them to get lost. He answers them. **"I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep."** With that being said, he still wants them to become his sheep. **"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."** He doesn't give up on people.

This morning, we sang the words of Psalm 23. These six verses contain some of the best comforts and promises that believers have hung on to for thousands of years. Every line is rich with wonderful, peace-giving words of comfort, hope and promise. That picture of a Shepherd is certainly a comforting picture for us. Yet, it is in the sixth and final verse, that David says something that is utterly incredible – and it is easily missed. **"Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life."** **"Follow"** is a word that we understand. It's a word that we use all the time. The word that is translated in our text as **"follow"** means *"to pursue or chases down."* In other words, God's goodness and mercy are not just passively hanging around behind us. They are actively pursuing us. They are chasing us down. Like a lion hunting its prey, so the goodness and mercy of God are chasing us down. He wants to be our Shepherd, he will stop at nothing to get us to be his sheep.

That's what Jesus is trying to do here in the temple that day. This Good Shepherd is giving a big promise in these words: **"I give them eternal life, and they shall 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."** He gives that promise to you today as well. This Shepherd wants to set you free from sin and guilt. He has promises for us that nothing in this world can give. Jesus wants to keep you safe in his shepherd's arms. What does he want us to do? He wants us to listen to him. Take comfort in knowing that Jesus knows your name. Know that he is for you. Trust him for some day we will **"dwell in the house of the Lord forever."** Amen.