

## **John 10:1-18**

**Mar. 5, 2014 - Good Shepherd**

”Hear”

We live in such a different world than the one Jesus lived in. Take wolves for instance. In the United States there has been a concerted and controversial effort to restore a wolf population in the West. Controversial because wolves are pack hunters that can cause significant damage to a flock or herd of ranch animals. I don't think I've ever seen a wolf. In Jesus' world things were wild in a way they are not for you and me. Wolves were a real danger. Jesus' words about the hired hand and the true shepherd rang true to daily experience. A true and faithful shepherd could be the difference between getting by and economic ruin.

In Jesus' time life was much more dangerous than it is for you and me. People were vulnerable to all kinds of forces which could rob them of life and health, from disease to lions and wolves, to lawless rulers to thieves and robbers to the ravages of poverty and malnutrition.

Our world is so different from that one. So on this Ash Wednesday when ashes are smeared upon our foreheads with the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” those words come as a reminder of a reality that we pretty much don't have to face day in day out. We do face it; reminders of this reality do come from time to time. But mostly we can ignore this part of the reality of our existence.

But for the people of Jesus' time walking through the darkest valley, walking through the valley of the shadow of death was a common experience. So they would have heard Jesus' words about the Good Shepherd and the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in a more intense way than we do.

But perhaps on this Ash Wednesday with this visible reminder of our mortality up there in plain sight on our foreheads, we might hear the words of Jesus and of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm the way they are meant to be heard.

So here's what the Scripture says about having the LORD as your shepherd. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, you are with me. Your rod and staff comfort me.” Note that the dark and dangerous valley is still there and you and I must still walk through it. But we are not alone in that valley. I can think of few things worse than facing a crisis, facing danger, being confused about what to do and having to do it alone. Better, much better, to have someone with you. Better still to have with you someone who really cares about you. Even better to have with you someone who is able to get us through that valley. The LORD is my shepherd. Even though I walk through the darkest valley I shall fear no evil.

Note also that enemies are still around. But because the LORD is my shepherd I feast in their presence. I am cared for. I need not unduly fear my enemies or lash out against them. In fact I can be kind and caring toward them because the LORD is taking care of me, and I will be OK.

Note also that I and you are dust, and to dust we shall return. There's not much we can do about

that. But because Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for us, our dust-ness is not the only reality and not the end of the story. There is another reality, the reality that when we were baptized, we were baptized into the death of Jesus so that as Jesus was raised from the dead, we , too, might live a new life.

In today's Gospel Jesus says hat the sheep know the voice of their true shepherd. Rolf Jacobson tells the story of a man he knows who is a sheep farmer. When he was away, his sheep were stolen. Shortly thereafter he attended a neighboring county fair. And he found his sheep. They had been re-tagged, but when they heard his voice, they cried out to him. The sheep knew the voice of their shepherd.

During this Lenten season I invite you to use this time to tune in to the voice of your shepherd. What are the ways that help you do that? What spiritual practices of prayer, good works, worship, mercy, caring, and giving that keep you attuned to the voice of Jesus? Practice them so that amidst the clutter and cacophony of sounds and voices that surround us you hear his voice clearly and always whether you are atop a sunny hill or down in the darkest valley.