

4-21-14

Sermon- Are you with the "IN CROWD"?

Scripture John 10:22-30 CTW Ps 23

Hymns- 18, 100, 524 (Sheep May Safely Graze?)

Theme- Trinity Evangelical has been given the same assurances of blessings and protection by our Good Shepherd, described in this passage. Therefore, we can enjoy the thrill together of stepping out in faith and stewardship as God's church, and we can reach out to the people this community. There are people we don't know, maybe people who are not like us, people of new cultures, but in Christ we can do it. With our Good Shepherd leading us, we can and will do thrilling things, because that's the exciting life that Jesus' little lambs are called to!

I. So, Sheep May Really Safely Graze?

Well, between the psalm and our two hymns so far this morning, it shouldn't be too hard if I ask you to picture in your minds the perfect pastoral scene — green pastures, a babbling brook, sheep grazing, lambs prancing in the sunlight, and a happy shepherd keeping a watchful eye over the entire scene.

Got it? Add some classical music if that helps. OK.

A. That picture is an attractive one for those of us who are stressed out, overworked, or even just itching to get outside more, but it's especially appealing for those who are fearful, or worried, or who feel that their lives are spinning out of control.

And that is exactly what God had in mind with the words and images he gave us in John 10 and the 23rd Psalm and everywhere else in the Bible where he describes the Lord as our Good Shepherd and we believers as his sheep.

These ideas of comfort and peace are what we most associate with the image of the Shepherd and his flock — and if that's the

only message your heart and mind and spirit need this morning, please hold on to it.

B. But let's be honest with ourselves...For many people that is not enough. As attractive — and true and biblical — as that perfect and peaceful pastoral picture is and is meant to be, for many people it's not enough. Sure, it's good for maybe a short little break from the daily grind — a place to retreat to, to recharge, maybe.

But beyond that they try to imagine themselves as the sheep in that picture and they think, "BOORRINGG! What's there to do, but sit around and eat grass?"

And you have to admit, even if you'd never think of it as boring, you'd have to consider it at least "uninteresting" or "unchallenging", if that's all there is to the life of a Christian.

But of course, that's not all there is. Quite the opposite, in fact — life as Jesus' little lambs is full of incredible excitement if you're ready for it and looking for it.

II. Live your life as one of Christ's followers and you can't help but know plenty of "sheep thrills."

A. Now that's going to be news to a lot of people, even some Christians. There are some false concepts floating around about what it means to be a sheep. Some people think that all the fun stops when you become a Christian — or at least try to live like one.

And looking at some Christians — even as they worship their Lord — you might even think that being a part of Christ's flock is a very unhappy state to find oneself in — their faces pucker up as though the quiet streams they are led to are full of vinegar, and from their posture and attitude you'd think their Shepherd makes them lie down in a briar patch.

And, of course, there are plenty of people who think that Christianity is basically just like all the other religions in the

world: nothing but another set of rules to live by — and a particularly restrictive set of rules at that. Following Jesus, they think, is all about obedience and doing one's duty, and so happiness and enthusiasm really have nothing to do with anything.

The Shepherds' rod and staff are there to threaten the sheep, and those who don't follow closely enough will be abandoned to the valley of the shadow of death. It's truly sad how mistaken some people are about what the Christian life is all about.

B. But on the other hand, there are also people who may have a fairly good understanding of what it means to be believers who have a false concept of what's truly fun and exciting.

Remember Shrek the Sheep? Shrek is what they named a ram that ran away from his flock and shepherd in New Zealand. He managed to survive, but not very well, on his own in the wild for six years.

And when they finally recaptured him, he had a problem — his wool hadn't been shorn in six years. Shrek was pretty much buried beneath his fleece. When they sheared him on Wednesday they got over sixty pounds of wool.

That was actually a pretty good outcome for a sheep that foolishly wandered off, apparently looking for something better than it had — most sheep would have ended up dead.

It's too bad many people take Shrek the sheep's approach with their spiritual lives. Although they know that the safest and best place for them to be is close to Jesus, their Good Shepherd, and in his flock, they go looking for thrills and excitement on the fringes of their faith — and beyond — because they think that's the only way to have any fun.

They stop going to church, they close their Bibles, they put themselves in temptation's way, they start to pick and choose

which commandments to keep, and eventually they wander away entirely from the faith.

Maybe someday someone will find them and be able bring them back home to the Lord, but the odds aren't in their favor —when you wander off looking for something better or more exciting, eventually you end up lost.

C. And that's tragic — not just because someone has lost his faith, but also because his wandering and disobedience started with such a sad misunderstanding of where life's greatest thrills are to be found. Because the real excitement in life is not in pushing your limits and living on the edge — the real excitement is found in and with Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd.

Perhaps we sometimes forget that because we get too used to the idea of our salvation and we start to take it for granted. We hear the gospel proclaimed every week and it's no longer fresh to our ears. We don't think about our baptisms, and the Lord's Supper becomes just something we do every other week.

But the gospel — the gracious good news of salvation in Christ — is anything but dull or tired. It is the most radical message the world has ever heard, and it works the greatest miracle the world will ever know.

I mean, think of what we all are by nature: we are born sinners, and pretty much as soon as we get the chance we start sinning our own sins. We're about as opposite to God's holiness and righteousness as you can get, and by nature we deserve only to be flung into the fires of hell.

But the light of the gospel breaks into our darkness with incredible news: that for Jesus' sake, God has forgiven all our sins. We didn't have to do a thing. He didn't even make us apologize first — no, while we were still sinners, when we were powerless to do anything to save ourselves, and entirely because of God's love, Christ died for us.

And because of that — because he poured out his blood for us on the cross, we belong to Christ now — we are his — and through our faith and through our baptisms we share in his resurrection.

D. We have been changed: changed from spiritually dead to eternally alive. We have been changed from absolutely guilty to perfectly innocent; changed from Satan's slaves to God's servants; changed from being powerless in our sins to being empowered by the Holy Spirit.

There are no changes more extreme than these, and they all were worked by God in us when Christ claimed us as his own and welcomed us into his flock.

And even though our coming to faith and all of these changes happened in an instant, perhaps a long time ago, the gospel still works wonder and joy in us every day. Every day — if we look — we can see the evidence of God's blessings in our lives, can't we?

And since we still sin, every day we can experience again the joy and thrill of confessing our sins to the Lord and knowing that they are forgiven, for Jesus' sake, no matter what we've done.

The Christian's life of repentance and faith is anything but dull or tired; we find the best kind of excitement at the foot of Christ's cross.

At a slightly less basic level, though, and going back to the imagery of our text, we can also say that the real excitement for Christ's sheep is in being close to him, the Shepherd.

We don't want to live on the edge of his flock; we want to be as close to him as possible, because we love him, because it's the safest place to be, and because it's where all the action is.

Now — to use a good evangelical question — what does this mean? Being close to our Good Shepherd means, first of all, simply spending time with him — in church, in Bible study, in prayer, and in the Lord's Supper.

But being close to our Shepherd is not just something passive — it means that we actively listen to his voice and obey it, and that we follow him wherever he wants us to go.

E. Our text today illustrates very clearly that the life of Jesus' little lambs is anything but dull. Note first of all how his followers get front-row seats for his confrontations with his enemies. Jesus was challenged by the leaders of the Jews, and he answered them for the sake of his sheep, because he knew that his enemies wanted nothing more than to draw his people away from him and keep others from believing in him.

The same thing still goes on today, and we still have front-row seats for it: Christ's enemies attack his person, his Word, and his relevance for our lives, and they try to draw us away from him.

And while these attacks most certainly involve us as his sheep, we remember that our Shepherd is really the one being challenged, and he can be trusted — absolutely — to protect us and keep us safe by his side, no matter what and no matter who Satan sends against him.

Jesus makes the point twice here, for emphasis: no one can snatch his sheep out of his hand — they are forever safe with him. He gives them — you — eternal life, and they — you — shall never perish.

This confidence is reinforced by his reference to something that certainly excited the people of his day — his miracles. All the power of God is at our Good Shepherd's control, and he uses it regularly and often for the protection and blessing of his sheep.

Occasionally we see actual miracles — we do — a disease healed with no medical explanation, an accident avoided, Christians kept safe when all around them other people are dying — but most of the time our Lord uses his power behind the scenes, just outside our view, to keep us safe and fill our lives with good things — exciting things that would not be there if we weren't close to our Shepherd.

III. Conclusion: Life as Jesus' sheep is like all of the above!

A. We know that we're in no danger, but there's still a great thrill in following him wherever he wants us to go.

Even Psalm 23, that perfect pastoral picture, makes that clear — can you imagine being “bored” sitting down for a feast at the table your Shepherd has prepared for you, while your enemies, who are eager to devour you, are all around, surrounding you? I don't know about you, but I would call that exciting.

For some of us that same excitement comes in witnessing our faith — whether it's to total strangers, close friends, or family members. Telling others about Jesus can seem — and can actually be — awfully risky, but we can step out and speak with boldness, because we are his sheep, and he is our Shepherd.

Witnessing is something we all do, but each of us also has his or her own excitements as a follower of Christ.

There are risks you can take, dangers you can face, opposition you can outlast, and opportunities you can take advantage of — all because you belong to Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

B. And it's not just as individual believers that we have this excitement, either. Our congregation — this little flock known as Trinity Evangelical has been given the same assurances of blessings and protection by our Good Shepherd, described in this passage. Therefore, we can enjoy the thrill together of stepping out in faith and stewardship as God's church, and we can reach out to the people this community. There are people we don't know, maybe people who are not like us, people of new cultures, but in Christ we can do it. With our Good Shepherd leading us, we can and will do thrilling things, because that's the exciting life that Jesus' little lambs are called to! **AMEN!**