

Called by Name

Year A, Easter 4 – John 10:1-10

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, May 11, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!*

Most of us don't much like being called sheep. Now, in my case, many of you will remember, I had some experiences working with sheep when I was a young man that led me to a certain prejudice against them. Every now and then, one Parishioner or another will remind me that I once alliteratively acknowledged sheep to be stupid, stubborn, and stinky.

But most of that is hardly just my *personal* opinion. Fairly broadly in our culture, sheep have become the symbol of mindless compliance with societal norms. Not only this time of the year among preachers, but every time the political season rolls around, (Does that seem to anyone else to be just about all the time, now?) political wonks from both sides of the aisle end up delivering withering, independent-minded diatribes against the unquestioning masses they deride as "sheeple."

If you have the good sense to avoid such diatribes, political or preachy, there remains the simple fact, open to observational verification by *anyone* that spends any time around sheep, that sheep aren't particularly the *brightest* creatures in the world. Through the technological miracle of YouTube, the other day I was watching an old episode of Monty Python's Flying Circus which featured a sketch in which a farmer bluntly makes the blunt assessment, "The trouble is, that sheep are very dim."

Jesus, however, seems to credit sheep with a good deal more sense. Or at least he credits them with one important piece of good sense – that they know their shepherd's voice. And that bit of good sense is *sensible* indeed, because the sheep are discerning enough to follow only the *right* voice. All their other qualities aside, that discerning ear matters a great deal to those of us who, like it or not, are the sheep of the flock. Because, like it or not, the sheep are facing real dangers, from without and from within.

Jesus promises that with the Lord as our shepherd, we will "come in and go out and find pasture." Outside the fold, sheep are under threat from predators. The shepherd's rod and staff are meant to provide not only comfort, but protection. There are forces at work in the world that would harass and steal and kill. But of course, the biggest risk comes from the sheep themselves – they are apt to wander off, each to its own way. God our Providence promises to sustain us, but it's hard for us to *believe* in God's abundance. Instead, we are constantly scouting for greener pastures, imagining that what God has given us so abundantly is somehow not enough to keep us safe, to keep us secure. "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it," goes one of my favorite hymns, "prone to leave the God I love."

Jesus, seems especially concerned about dangers *inside* the sheepfold. Even in our place of shelter and rest, thieves may come in to steal and kill and destroy. Sometimes thieves slip over the walls and whisper to us that our Easter hope is misguided, that we truly *are* following blindly, that death *will*, after all, have the final word. And sometimes it is the sheep that whisper to us that our shelter is a prison and that we'd do better to leave behind our false sense of security, or that there's an easier path to transcendence, without all the work and uncertainty of transformation by the grace of God.

That same Monty Python sketch begins with a visitor to the farm who sidles up to the farmer standing beside the pasture. The city fella' is shocked to see sheep up in the trees. "I say," he begins, "those *are* sheep, aren't they?" When the farmer grunts in the affirmative, the gentleman adjusts his bowler, shifts his umbrella a bit nervously and continues, "Yes, yes, I thought so. Only, uh... why are they up in the trees?" "That's a fair question," his more rustic companion answers, "and one that in recent weeks has bean mooch on me mind." "It is my considered opinion," the farmer continues, "that they're nestin'." "It is my belief," he says, "that these sheep are laborin' under the misapprehension that they are birds." As we watch what the farmer and city fella' are watching, we see that it is bad enough that the

sheep are trying to walk around their pasture on just their hind legs. But the real problem is that they are also trying to fly, with predictably disastrous results. “Notice,” the farmer points out, “that they do not so much fly, as plummet.” One attempt after another fails before the alarmed eyes of the city visitor, punctuated by the usual Monty Pythonesque splats that I will not try to reproduce from this fair desk.

It seems that these particular sheep had gotten the idea that they could fly from a sheep named Harold, “. . . that sheep over there under the elm,” the farmer points out. “He’s that most dangerous of animals,” he concludes, “a *clever* sheep.”

Perhaps we, too, sometimes try being too clever by half. Wouldn’t it be easier, we reason, if we could just take wing, if our human natures were merely an illusion, waiting to be cast off? What if we didn’t need to be patient followers, trusting beyond our immediate desires? What if we didn’t need to suffer the indignities of our limitations? What if we weren’t burdened with the sufferings of our neighbors?

For that matter, wouldn’t it be easier if our shepherd, our savior, didn’t first have to suffer death upon the cross, before he entered into glory? From outside the sheepfold, we probably look pretty foolish following in the footsteps of such a savior, listening to the voice of such a shepherd. A thousand *competing* voices call to us that we should look for escape instead of sacrifice. The wags of print and sound and video bites shout over and over that we should seek an easier bliss than the peace of God’s still waters. Nearly every aspect of the culture that surrounds us screams that we should search for our own greener pastures and leave the rest of the flock behind. Christ crucified is a stumbling block still to those who don’t know his voice. Why, after all, would we worship a God who became like us, a shepherd who died as one of the lambs?

“The sheep,” Jesus said, “know the voice of the shepherd.” The one to whom the sheep belong doesn’t call us to become something different, but to grow into who we truly *are*. The Good Shepherd doesn’t round up the sheep with a whistle, or herd them with whips and prods and dogs, but by calling us each by name. In the end, our only wisdom is to know our shepherd’s voice. Our *one* skill as sheep is to listen – to listen from the deep place in which we recognize who we truly are, and *whose* we truly are. Because the Good Shepherd is the only one who calls us by our own names, our true names, our Created names.

Most of us don’t much like being called sheep. But it’s our blessing, our safety, our abundance, to be sheep who are called – and called each by name.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!*