

4th Sunday in Easter – Year A - May 15, 2011 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

Based on John 10:1-10 written by Pastor Paul Horn

Your Good Shepherd Speaks to You

- I. Listen to his voice**
- II. Know his voice**

Dear members of Faith, our guests, the friends and family of our young confirmands; to the parents, Dean and Katy, and Louise, and especially you, Hannah and Kristen.

So, here you are. It's been two long years. Are you nervous? It's ok, you're probably as nervous as I am. Pastors get that way when they preach a sermon. Do you think you're as nervous as David was from the story in our First Lesson this morning? (1Samuel 17) David may have even been close to your age, but probably a little older. He was a shepherd. On two separate occasions a lion and a bear came and carried off one of the sheep from his flock. And on both occasions he chased down the wild animals, confronted them and killed them. Can you imagine coming across a bear in the field near your house, Kristen, or in the woods where you live, Hannah, and killing that bear with no gun in your hands?

It's what David did. And then, he willingly volunteers to face the champion fighter of the Philistines, an experienced Soldier; a man named Goliath. Goliath was a giant of a man, as tall as this ceiling. The armor he wore on his body weighed more than the two of you put together. The point of his spear weighed 15lbs. Go home and tie a 15 pound weight to the end of a broom stick and throw it with some accuracy? This is the power this man had. And David volunteers to confront him, all alone, with no one to back him up. This is the confidence that young David has; no armor, no shield, no sword in his hand, but only five smooth stones in his pocket and a sling in his hand, and... the most important weapon, **“The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.”**

In a sense the two of you are doing exactly what David did over 3,000 years ago. The two of you are voluntarily stepping up onto the field of battle. Today you are making a promise to fight against many Goliaths; all that is sinful, evil and vile in this world. Many people in this world will taunt you and challenge you to turn back, to turn away from God, to give up the fight, just as Goliath did with David. Will you stand up to them, like David?

You will. It's why you are here today; to make a promise to be faithful to the Word of God you have studied these past two years. You have come here today to make a promise not to be a part of this world, to defy Satan and false doctrine, to deny your sinful self, and instead submit to God's will. But the good news is you're not alone, just as David was not alone. You have a Good Shepherd to stand next to you, to strengthen you, to guide you, to pick you up when you fall down. As you stand on the field of battle, your Good Shepherd speaks to you. Know his voice and listen to his voice.

In John chapter 10 Jesus was telling a parable to the Pharisees (the spiritual leaders of Israel). A parable is a story about an everyday activity to help explain a spiritual truth. In this setting, Jesus used something all the people listening would have been familiar with; shepherding sheep. Now, as you may remember from past sermons and Bible studies, sheep are not the smartest animals. They kind of do their own thing. If one sheep decides to lead the rest of the herd and goes off in a one direction, all will follow, even if it's down a steep ravine. Sheep need someone to lead them. Unlike shepherds you've seen on TV, Palestinian shepherds did not drive their sheep from behind, but walked out in front of their flock and led them. He led them with his voice.

Sheep will only listen to their shepherd's voice. Over time they become familiar with it, because they hear it every day, and they know that that voice leads them to green pastures and quiet waters. When a substitute shepherd comes in, even if he dresses like the other shepherd, the sheep won't follow him. They don't recognize his voice. In fact, they will run away from the stranger. The same is true when I go to your homes and tell your dogs to stop barking at me. They don't listen because I'm a stranger.

Jesus used this picture of the relationship between shepherd and his sheep to explain the relationship you have with your Savior. You and I are like sheep. The prophet Isaiah says that just like sheep we like to do our thing and go our own way and we often get ourselves into trouble (Isaiah 53). We need a shepherd. We need his voice, his Word, to guide us and lead us. You know that voice. You know his voice because you've been listening to his voice for a long time. Since your baptism, your parents have read Bible stories to you. You've been in Sunday school, attended church and Bible class. You have read the Bible on your own. You know that this is where you hear the voice of your Good Shepherd. It is especially important during the next years of your life that you continue to listen to his voice and know his voice... because you're going to face some serious changes and challenges.

This fall, both of you will enter high school. You will make new friends. You will have new teachers, new coaches, new instructors. Four years from now you will, God-willing, enter college, and you will make new friends and have new professors. 8-9 years from now you will start a new job with the new degree that you have, maybe in that time you will even get married. All along the way, you will hear other voices, strange voices... voices that don't sound like the Good Shepherd's voice.

The strange voices are the lions and bears of this world that threaten to steal the sheep away from Jesus' sheep pen. The strange voices are the Goliaths that will taunt you and will challenge the faith you will profess today. These voices won't look like lions and bears and giants named Goliath. These voices will come from your friends who will try to influence you to do things that go against God's commandments; they come from a kind, loving boyfriend who will want to do things that God has reserved for marriage; they will be the voices of professors whom you will adore, but they will try to plant in your mind a view of the world that just doesn't jive with Scripture; they will come from the television shows you watch and the music you listen to. They may make you laugh and entertain you, but they will promote greed and pride and self-centeredness. These voices will even come from your own sinful self.

At first you will recognize these voices as strange and run away. But the more you listen to them, the more familiar they become, and the more comfortable you become listening to those voices, and then eventually you will not recognize them as evil anymore. You won't run away, you will want to run to them. But in the end, these voices will lead you off a rocky cliff; they lead to death; the destruction of both your body and your soul.

In your life, you will struggle with these voices. I know, because I've been where you are now, and all of these people here know, because they've been there, too. We still struggle. My dear ladies, your Good Shepherd encourages you: listen to his voice, **"I am the gate for the sheep; whoever enters through me will be saved. I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."** To keep his sheep safe at night, a shepherd often constructed a large courtyard, with walls made of stone, topped with thorns branches that acted like barbed wire to keep animals and thieves from climbing over and stealing the sheep. If the sheep wanted to go in or out of the sheep pen, they would have to go through the shepherd who stood at the gate. Your Savior Jesus tells you that not only is he the Good Shepherd, but he is also the gate. The only place where you will find safety and refuge and comfort and hope is by passing through the gate. The only way to find strength as you are attacked by savage lions and bears and Goliaths that threaten to steal you away from him is to go to him. He is the gate. He promises, **"Anyone who enters through the gate will be saved."** Jesus means to say, "Anyone who believes in me will be saved."

What a blessing that both of you do believe! By God's grace, your parents brought you to the baptismal font, where by God's Word with the water he created the gift of faith in your heart. Through faith, he made you his child. Through faith, you received the washing away of your sins. By faith, you look to Christ's life as your own. Jesus was a teenager, too. He went through instruction just like you. He went to school. He hung out with his friends. He faced the same temptations, heard the same voices you hear, trying to entice him to sin. But unlike the weak sheep that we are, Jesus always listened to his Father's voice. He always followed his Father's path. Through faith, Jesus' perfect life covers over your imperfect life. It is through faith in the gate (Christ Jesus) that you possess both his life and his death.

Shepherds were very close to their sheep. They slept among them at night so that they could protect their flock. David was a wonderful example of what a shepherd was willing to do for his flock. What David did is a picture of your Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, did for you, only Jesus gave up his life to save yours. He suffered the torments of hell so that you would not have to. He suffered God's wrath over your sins and allowed himself to be punished so you wouldn't be. He laid down his life, to save you, his little lambs, from death, from sins, from hell. And then the Good Shepherd took it back up again and lives today and tomorrow and forever. Because of his resurrection, you will rise, too, and you will walk through the gates of heaven.

This is what your Good Shepherd has done for you. You will listen to him, and you will know his voice. Because in your life you will one day find that you've been listening more and more to the voices of this sinful world. You will discover that life is often helpless and hopeless. You will find that life sometimes stinks. You will wonder where to turn. You will wonder where to go when you feel awful for the terrible things you have done. You will look for a safe place to go, a place that offers comfort, hope, forgiveness and encouragement. It is then, my little lambs, that you will go to the sheep pen. To get there you will have to pass through the gate, through the Lord Jesus; through his Word and Sacrament. There, in his Word and Sacraments, you will find peace and pardon and strength.

The two of you are unique in this world. For two young women to stand up here today and make these promises... there are so many other young ladies out there who would rather not. But by the grace of God you have been led to go against the flow of sinful society, to go against what everyone says is truth, and to stand firmly on God's promises. You would rather listen to the voice of your Good Shepherd. When the voice of strangers call to you, run away and run to your Good Shepherd and listen to his voice. So I have one last confirmation class assignment for you: memorize your confirmation verse. Don't memorize it, learn it. Hold it close to your heart all the days of your life. Hold his voice close to you, so that when he comes again, he will take you to the place of eternal rest and everlasting safety. May God grant it to you both, for Jesus' sake. Amen.