

Revelation 7: 9-17
John 10: 22-30
April 21, 2013
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Jesus is challenged by Jewish adversaries to declare in plain speech if he is the messiah. Jesus knows that this is a trap. These antagonists are not interested in the truth they simply want Jesus to incriminate himself so that they can kill him under the Law of Moses. Jesus' response is typical. He tells them that if they haven't recognized who he is by now they never will. And anyway, Jesus proclaims his identity not by mere words but by his deeds of love. If they do not recognize in his healing, teaching, feeding and awakening people to faith as the acts of the Anointed One their eyes have been blinded.

This is not a blanket comment on Judaism. There were many people who maintained their Jewish identity and who honored Jesus. There even were many who came to believe he was indeed the messiah. But as in any age there are always people who are skeptical or even hostile to the idea that any human being could be a divine savior. And as we observed in the encounter with the disciple Thomas, skepticism is not a bad thing. Honest faith is always preferable to pious or sentimental observance with no struggle.

But these are not skeptical. They actively reject Jesus as messiah and are on a mission to discredit him. This is the blindness. It is the willful rejection of any evidence which might hint a larger reality. It is the active seeking of all evidence which justifies a foregone conclusion.

Blind faith often ignores hard realities and has no answers for the world's tragedies except, "It must be God's plan." Blind unbelief ignores the power of spiritual presence and the strength of human beings to move through tragedy and keep their faith; and not only *keep* their faith, but provide spiritual strength for others.

That is why Jesus is less interested in *what* we say about him than *how* we respond to him. Anyone can say they believe in Jesus. But do we *listen for his voice*? Are we tuned to listen to the Jesus frequency? Do our lives reflect the fact that we hear and respond? Are we the sheep of his pasture?

This is a profound question. If we are honest the answer is both yes and no. We are only partially converted to full relationship to Jesus as our shepherd. In Jesus' picture of the sheep there is complete trust and a willingness to follow where he leads. The key to this attitude of complete trust is the full acceptance that we are safe in his flock.

Jesus says that God has given the sheep to him and no one and no thing can snatch the sheep from his hand—to quote the cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz—"not never not no how!" When we know in the depths of our hearts that we are safe in the palm of Jesus' hand and that literally *nothing* can cause us to fall out then we experience true freedom. We are not afraid to take risks. We can release the need to control our lives to God knowing that whatever happens, God has our best life at heart.

On the other hand, to the extent that we do not trust that we are safe in the palm of Jesus' hand we become fearful. We seek to control life because we do not believe we will get what we need unless we grab it or work long hours to get it. When

trouble comes in the form of personal or community disturbance we react with anxiety. We begin to behave as if there is no God and that we are all alone in the world. We then engage in a self-fulfilling prophecy. We become isolated, and experience that we are helpless and powerless. And at that moment we create the very circumstance we fear and so take life into our own hands. We end up on a rocky crag away from the shepherd and the flock.

As sheep who are also human beings we know that it is never the case that we are *either* sheep *or* not. There will always be dimensions of us that are afraid and do not feel safe. There will always be dimensions of our lives when we do not trust God to watch over us and provide for us. This sheep business is a journey of faith. It is an ongoing process of learning to trust that we are and will always be *safe* in his hands. The task of the journey is to confront our fears and become aware of the ways we do not trust God to help us. The invitation of Jesus is to ask him to overcome in us our fears and to give us the grace to trust. The joy of the journey is when we discover the freedom that comes when the old worries and fears do not have power over us anymore and we breathe more freely the fresh and light air of God's Spirit.

This is the life of faith and the journey from fear to freedom. It is what happens when the "sheep" in us hears the shepherd's voice and follows—at first in fear and trembling, but gradually with growing confidence and joy. And as we do we cannot help but share this Good News and expand the flock. Amen.