

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“My Sheep”

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“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (Jn. 10:27-28).

“My sheep hear my voice.” These are very simple words of Jesus. Nothing too difficult to understand. His sheep gather to hear His Word.

Some people say they can worship God just as easily by taking a nice walk in nature. I don't buy it. Creation can point to God's creative genius, but that's as far as it goes. It doesn't point to Jesus. Creation also won't absolve you of sins or challenge you to confess them in the first place. Creation won't tell you the Good News Jesus died and is risen for the forgiveness of your sins. We need to hear the Word. “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Lk. 24:27). “My sheep hear my voice.”

“I know them.” The downside of that is he knows our sin. There is no hiding it from him, even if it's just locked up in our thoughts. There are times we wish He would avert His eyes and wear ear protection. There are times we pretend He doesn't know or doesn't care. We like to think He has bigger fish to fry and is not concerned with our little “indiscretions”. But we kid ourselves. Psalm 139, “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me’, even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

And don't begin to think He will save you because you're such a nice guy and you like to help people. Remember the warning Jesus gave in Matthew 7? “On that day (Judgment Day) many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’” Notice how they call attention to their good works and expect God to receive them into heaven on *that* basis. But Jesus tells them, “I never knew you; depart from me.”

“I know my sheep.” There's a big plus side to Him knowing you. He knows what you need better than you do yourself. He knows what your hopes are. He knows the dangers you don't yet perceive. And because He loves you, He cares. Ps. 121, “He who watches over you will neither slumber nor sleep.” While *you* sleep, He's there guarding, protecting, doing what good shepherds do. He is not a shepherd on duty some of the time. He is the untiring Shepherd of Israel.

“My sheep follow me” he says. How do you know whether a person is a true disciple of Jesus? I certainly cannot read the heart. But there are identifiers for all to see. Of those who are not following, Jesus says “You will know them by their fruit.” Conversely, where there is faith, there will be good works (James 2). Jesus also said, “If you love Me, you will obey what I command” (Jn. 14:15). And Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for *one another*” (Jn. 13:35). That is if you bear with one another and are slow to anger and quick to forgive. You grieve when they grieve and rejoice when they rejoice. Doing such things won't save us, but they will identify us as His sheep, His disciples.

“I know my sheep, and they follow me.” “My sheep.” Despite all the deplorable things we do and say and think, He still calls us “my sheep.” Despite our aimless wanderings, and how easily we forget to whom we belong: “my sheep.”

That little word “my” is highly compressed. There's tons of pressure per square letter. Just take something sharp and poke the seal and the thing bursts and expands with untold forgiveness and immeasurable patience and grace. “My sheep.” “My people.” “My child.”

“I give them eternal life” Jesus says. The word “give” changes **everything** for us. If a gift is anything, it's free. If it's not absolutely free, it's no longer a gift. “I give them eternal life.” Eternal life is free, undeserved and unearned by us.

“I give them eternal life.” Jesus is the One who suffered for sin on a cross, rose from the dead and sits at the right hand of the Father. Therefore, He's the only one who has authority to give you eternal life. You are

baptized into His name. Not Buddha or Muhammed or anyone else. “**I** give them eternal life.” “Not by eating kale and doing cardio workouts through the day. “**I** give them eternal life.” Not by dying for your country. Not by giving everything you own to the poor (or to the church for that matter). Not by amassing a whopping pile of good works while trying to keep the sin contained and manageable. “**I** give them eternal life.” Not by deciding for Christ. Lost and wayward sheep don’t find the shepherd. The shepherd finds them. A hapless lamb doesn’t take a rod to the wolf. The shepherd does that. **I** give them eternal life.

“No one can snatch them out of my hand” he says.

Occasionally, I like to go to Century House in Madison. They sell Norwegian furniture, and among all those comfortable things to sit in, there’s a brand that’s called the “Stressless Chair”. It might be the most comfortable chair and ottoman in all the world. It’s like sitting on a cloud. I’d never buy one; they cost as much as \$6000 dollars! I just like to kick the tires and take it for a little test drive.

As His child you are resting in the hand of God and that is far better than any Stressless Chair. In His hand: that is the safest place in all the universe. It is the most secure and loving place. Behind the steering wheel, or in the dentist’s chair, or the defendant’s seat, you are in His hand. If you are ever admitted into hospice care, you are not just resting in a hospital bed. You are resting in His hand, a hand that bears the marks of crucifixion. It’s the best place to be.

“They shall never parish.” I don’t know how many times I’ve heard it: as long as we remember her, she will never have really died. That’s a bald-faced lie! It’s only a matter of time before you and I are forgotten to all the world. Then what?

I’m ok with the world forgetting me because I know my Shepherd never will. He says in Isaiah, “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast. Though she may forget, I will never forget you.” That’s what matters: **His** memory, not ours . . . **His** promises, not ours . . . **His** generosity, not ours. **His** salvation, not some pretend comfort we invent for ourselves! Even though there are so very many of us, He promises, “I will not forget **you**”.

One Autumn in the St. Louis area, I took a long walk out to see the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. I came up to these massive flocks of European Starlings, gathering on the tall cottonwoods near the confluence. I’ve never seen anything like it before or since. Tens of thousands of them. The trees looked like they had black leaves instead of green. Occasionally, a portion would take off from the trees together, like a large, dark amoeba shifting and dancing in the sky.

No individual bird stood out as unique; they looked like they were stamped out of a machine press. But I think we flatter ourselves to assume only humans are uniquely created and known to God. A flock of sheep may all look alike to us, but to a shepherd who’s with them day in and day out . . . he knows them, knows their uniqueness, their personalities, their names. Though a flock of birds look the same to us, my guess is the Father knows each one and created each one uniquely. If He can do that with snowflakes, He can certainly do it with birds. We know He cares for each one. Jesus said, “Not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father” (Mt. 10:29).

You are not anonymous to the Lord your God. He knows you, everything about you. And still He loves you and has laid down His life for you, and gives you eternal life.

Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (Jn. 10:27-28). All praise be to Him. Amen.