

Theme: God calls *us*

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we follow you as sheep follow a shepherd: your son taught us what it means to be dependent on you; may we be ever vigilant in hearing the shepherd's voice, your son, Jesus Christ, through whom we pray. Amen.

Lee Griess shares this airplane story. A new kind of plane was on its first flight. It was full of reporters and journalists. A little while after takeoff, the captain's voice was heard over the speakers. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to be your pilot for this plane's historic first flight. I can tell you the flight is going well.

"Nevertheless, I have to tell you about a minor inconvenience that has occurred. The passengers on the right side can, if they look out their window, see that the closest engine is slightly vibrating. That shouldn't worry you, because this plane is equipped with four engines and we are flying along smoothly at an acceptable altitude.

"As long as you are looking out the right side, you might as well look at the other engine on that side. You will notice that it is glowing, or more precisely one should say, burning. That shouldn't worry you either, since this plane is designed to fly with just two engines if necessary, and we are maintaining an acceptable altitude and speed.

"As long as we are looking out the plane, those of you on the left side shouldn't worry if you look out your side of the plane and notice that one engine that is supposed to be there is missing. It fell off about ten minutes ago. Let me tell you that we are amazed that the plane is doing so well without it.

"However, I will call your attention to something a little more serious. Along the center aisle all the way down the plane a crack has appeared. Some of you are, I suppose, able to look through the crack and may even notice the waves of the Atlantic Ocean below.

“In fact, those of you with very good eyesight may be able to notice a small lifeboat that was thrown from the plane. Well, ladies and gentlemen, you will be happy to know that your captain is keeping an eye on the progress of the plane from that lifeboat below.”

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations very similar to that plane flight. Everything around us seems to be falling apart and the person in charge seems to be as remote as the captain in the raft on the ocean far below.

But the person in charge of our lives is not remote. He is our Shepherd and he is leading the way. Leading us; giving us eternal life; assuring us we will never perish; and no one can snatch us away.

It is our shepherd, who was minding his own business, who finds himself embroiled in a religious dispute at the temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus had just healed the man born blind. During a second conversation with the formerly blind man, some Pharisees overhear the conversation. They confront Jesus with Jesus' accusation that they are sinners. Jesus continues this debate with the Pharisees by describing what a good shepherd is.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we hear the last of the Good Shepherd discourse in John's gospel. Jesus' hearers are divided. Some say he has a demon. Others said that a demon wouldn't open the eyes of a man born blind.

The scene then shifts, but Jesus remains in Jerusalem. It is the Feast of Dedication. This was to celebrate the rededication of the temple after it was desecrated by the Greeks and Judea won independence from the Greeks by the Maccabees. These days, it is called Chanukah.

Jesus takes shelter under the portico of Solomon. This was a covered area on the eastern part of the temple complex in the Court of the Gentiles. This part of temple grounds was open to all people. Jesus is probably getting out of the rain or snow.

Jesus' presence on the temple grounds creates a crowd of temple authorities. Jesus implies through word and deed that he might be the messiah, but he

has never made that kind of a claim (except to the woman at the well). The authorities want him to make a public declaration.

They ask, “How long will you keep us in suspense?” This can be translated in one of two ways. The Greek is ambiguous. One way may be what our NRSV translation implies is that they are in suspense, in anticipation as to who Jesus really is. Another way to translate this is, “Why do you annoy and vex us?” The former translation implies they are open to Jesus being the messiah. The latter translation implies they are asking an adversarial question. John may be deliberately implying both possibilities.

Jesus still refuses to directly answer them. He merely says that he has told them, but they don’t believe him. Jesus refuses to repeat himself. In some ways, Jesus is like Inspector Clouseau of the Pink Panther movies who people find difficult to understand and Clouseau responds, “How many times do I have to keep repeating myself!”

But Jesus’ claim is not done by words. It is done by deed. In fact, they are done by the will of his Father. And it is those deeds that testify about Jesus’ identity.

Jesus says that they don’t believe who Jesus is because they are not among Jesus’ sheep. Jesus’ sheep know his voice and they follow him. That’s what separates the authorities from Jesus’ followers. Jesus’ followers follow Jesus’ voice and the religious authorities do not.

When we were in Bethlehem last January, we visited a hospital that offers healing and treatment to poor Palestinians. They depend, heavily, on donations to keep the hospital open. When we left the bus, across the street from the hospital, was an open field. A flock of sheep was walking into the field, following a shepherd. The shepherd had no concern that one of the sheep would break away from the flock and get lost. They all followed him and scattered to eat where he told them. They depend on the shepherd and they trust him.

The authorities don’t trust Jesus. Jesus is a threat to their authority.

To those who follow Jesus, he gives them eternal life. They will never die. No one will ever take them away from Jesus. That is what the Good

Shepherd does. The shepherd will fight anyone who tries to take away a member of the flock.

Jesus' sheep came from the Father. No one can take them away from the Father and no one can take them away from Jesus, because the Father is greater than anything and any being in the universe. So, it is impossible for them to be snatched away.

Then Jesus pushes the authorities hard. Jesus says that he and the Father are one. This puts his audience over the top. The very next verse that we don't hear today is that they take up stones to stone Jesus to death. Jesus talks his way out of it and escapes. Jesus claims that there is no difference between God and himself. Jesus is God. It is blasphemy and is punishable by death under the Law of Moses.

Jesus seems to go way beyond answering their original question. They merely want to know if he is the messiah. Instead, Jesus claims that he much more than the messiah, he is God.

Why can Jesus make this claim? Well, if they were paying attention, the authorities would have their answer. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. God, the Father, is the Good Shepherd. Ergo, Jesus is God. They never got Jesus' line of logic. So, Jesus had to spell it out for them. When he did, they responded in righteous anger.

The core of what Jesus is trying to say is, it is God who seeks us out, not the other way around. Jesus makes us his sheep. We don't make Jesus our shepherd. This is simple Jewish theology. The authorities should have picked up on this. It is evident in psalms 23 and 100. God calls us. If we answer, we are led to green pastures. If we don't answer, we get lost.

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, give us the gift of understanding our own limitations: we are yours and you are ours, through whom we owe our lives and without whom we lose our way; be our way and lead us to eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Text: **John 10:22–30** (NRSV)

²² At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴ So the Jews gathered

around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah,^b tell us plainly.”²⁵ Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me;²⁶ but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.²⁷ My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.²⁹ What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand.^c ³⁰ The Father and I are one.”¹

^b Or *the Christ*

^c Other ancient authorities read *My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of the Father’s hand*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 10:22–30). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.