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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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John 10:22-30

In this holy season we continue to shout the Easter Greeting -- Christ is Risen, Alleluia! He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!

We do so because this is particularly the season of Good News -- the revelation of God's grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus. He was crucified by the forces of darkness -- sin, death and all evil. He was raised by the Father and in his resurrection we are assured that those forces of darkness have been defeated. They do not have the last word. God has the last word and it is a good word of life now and life in the age to come. We gather to celebrate this gift and to come before God "With Joy and Thanksgiving." We praise and thank God as we gather here to worship.

And as we gather to worship, we also gather to learn more about what God is up to in the world, especially what God is doing with and for those who trust in him and seek to serve him.

Jesus put it this way in today's Gospel Lesson: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."

People sometimes complain that when we are described as being like sheep it is not a compliment. After all, sheep are not very strong, they are not really able to defend themselves very well, they seem to be unable to think very clearly for themselves; without someone leading them they easily go astray, they wander away. They don't seem to be very good at developing pastures with grass to eat, they apparently have to be led to both food and water.

All of that may be true. In fact these characteristics of sheep do seem to describe many of our characteristics. Like sheep we really have to depend on our Shepherd for real defense against our enemies. Like sheep we have to be led. Like sheep, someone has to provide for us. Psalm 23, which we shared this morning, describes us very well.

There are really only two problems with the descriptions that liken us to sheep -- We really like to think of ourselves as being more able, more independent, more in control than sheep are, so we often resist and resent the characterization, and secondly, even when we do "sheepishly" acknowledge how we are like sheep we seldom realize how blessed we are to have Jesus as our Good Shepherd.

The first problem is one of ego and pride. I remember being a young man in college, I was home for spring break, my car wouldn't start, my dad came outside and offered to help me (he had been a car mechanic earlier in life) and I shouted, "I don't want any help!"

"I don't want any help! I will do it my way! I will have it my way! I am in control! I know what is best! Don't try to tell me what to do! I can handle it! I can

face anything! I can do anything! I'm in charge here! I'm not some dumb, lazy, weak sheep!"

Do any of these phrases sound familiar?

Most of the time when we say these things it is a denial of what is really going on inside of us. If we really feel confident, if we really are strong we don't have to shout about it. Most of these claims that we are in control are fed by internal fears that we are NOT in control.

Twelve Step Groups remind us all that we begin to get well when we recognize we are sick, we begin to become strong when we admit we are weak.

The fact of the matter is this: we are sheep.

We can't make the sun come up in the morning or set in the west in the evening. We can't make people like us. We can't predict the future. Sometimes we can't even provide for ourselves -- the company lays off everybody in our division and even though we did our work well, we no longer have a job. We can't avoid some sickness and pain. We can't keep our friends and family alive forever. We can't be sure that our investments will increase in value. We can't make our children happy or successful. We can't avoid every careless driver on the highway.

We can't make choices that are consistently good and healthy.

The fact of the matter is this: we are sheep. We need a Shepherd.

And, this is the Good News -- we have a Good Shepherd.

Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." We are not alone in this world. We are not alone when trouble strikes or good times roll. The voice of Jesus is present. He speaks to us words of encouragement, words of healing, words of promise, words of life. Have you forgotten some of those words? Pick a Gospel, pick Luke, for example, and read what Jesus does and what Jesus says. Oh yes, he can be quite sharp and critical with those who think they know it all, but see how compassionate he is with those who seek healing and hope. That includes us. He says he knows us. He says we can follow him. We also can live lives of meaning and purpose as he has taught us.

There is a wonderful section in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, verses 31 and following where Jesus describes the Last Judgment and calls to his faithful sheep who have followed him. He puts them on his right hand and says, "Come blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." We follow him with lives of meaning and purpose making a difference in the world. And in the process, his promise in our Gospel Lesson is proved true -- the promise where Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."

Yes, we are sheep. Limited in so many ways.

Yes, we have a Good Shepherd who is unlimited in so many ways and who gives the gift of life to us.

How shall we respond?

With Joy and Thanksgiving.

Have you ever thought about how many times through the last hundred years or more these walls, this holy place, has echoed with the words of the 23rd Psalm? Have you ever thought of how many generations have heard the promises of the Good Shepherd and have received those promises fulfilled? Have you ever thought of the legacy left by those who have gone before us and the legacy we can leave to them?

The greatest legacy we can leave to them is a strong and vibrant ministry that makes a difference in this community. And that strong and vibrant ministry depends on three things:

First, it totally depends on God and God's gifts of grace, of power and direction.

Secondly, it also depends on our acknowledgement that we are sheep and by ourselves we can do nothing and so we must look to God for the gifts of faith and life that can become God's legacy through us.

Finally, it really depends on us living lives of meaning and purpose that truly make a difference in this community.

Our legacy can be a strong and vibrant ministry that serves the people who live here now and those who will come in the future.

At this time in Immanuel's history this legacy depends on some practical realities related to the building itself. By now you know that the building needs a new roof. The steeple needs a new roof. This is a big project. This is a significant undertaking. It will be costly. But, it is necessary. For the sheep of Jesus gathered in this place to follow the Good Shepherd this wonderful building has to be cared for. The roof has to be replaced.

Today is the day you can make a significant gift toward this effort. I know you have been thinking and praying about this and you probably have a pretty good idea of what you are planning to do With Joy and Thanksgiving.

I want to affirm that. Thank you.

But, I want to challenge you one more time. Are you sure you are really trusting God as fully as you might? Is God calling you to move a step beyond conventional prudence? Is God asking you to be more generous than you imagined possible.

I don't know. I can't decide that for you.

But, I do know that when we let God lead us we accomplish things we had never dreamed possible. When I was with you last time I talked about how my wife encouraged me and challenged me to a level of generosity I just did not believe was possible. She was talking about tithing, which I thought was beyond our ability, but it proved to be possible. And, that has been good for me, for us, spiritually. It has given us a deeper faith and trust in God. Perhaps for us it has been simply acknowledging as fully as we can that we are truly sheep and that we need our Good Shepherd and that in response, With Joy and Thanksgiving, we will let ourselves be stretched to a level of generosity beyond what we once thought possible.

We were created to praise and honor God. One of the most fulfilling ways we do that is by generously giving ourselves, our time and our possessions for God's purposes.

"With Joy and Thanksgiving" is an opportunity for your spiritual growth. It is an opportunity for this congregation and its continuing ministry. God is calling you to great and generous acts of faith.

Trust him and do your best.

Amen.