

Material for website: May 17, 2020 This short passage from John gives us a sharp picture of a continuing controversy that occurred between Jesus and the religious leaders of his time. The controversy was about Jesus' true identity. This particular scene presents Jesus responding to those who question his authority. Jesus answers in a few short sentences using four verb forms to answer his critiques.

These four verb forms summarize Jesus' identity. The first thing that Jesus says to his critics is "I know my sheep." The verb is *to know*. Jesus says that he knows us. This is both frightening and challenging. It is frightening because of all the secrets in our lives. We are able to keep secrets from family, friends and co-workers, but this implies that Jesus knows us thoroughly-better than we know ourselves. The thoughts of our hearts, our motives for good deeds, all of the ways we live; in all of these things, we are known completely and entirely by Jesus. There is still more to this knowing. Jesus knows our needs, our pains, our hurts, our sorrow. This passage of Scripture begins with the knowledge that God, in Jesus Christ, knows us completely and totally.

The second verb that I want to call attention to is the verb *to give*. Jesus says, "To my sheep, I give eternal life." In John's Gospel, the phrase eternal life certainly stands for everlasting life, but it means much more. It stands not just for life after death, but for the quality and wholeness we have in Christ in this world. When Jesus says, "I give them eternal life," I remember the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and the provisions that Jesus offers. "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want." We heard from Lambie that this means he gives us all we need.

The third verb is *to hear*. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice." I sometimes have people say to me, "If only Jesus were with us now and we could see him and hear his voice. If we could hear with our own ears, then we could believe, then we could be more obedient to God's will." I actually believe that we do hear, but that it is difficult to hear. We hear of Jesus' love and mercy and we hear that well. But we also know that Jesus taught to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love our enemy. We hear it, but it is difficult to follow this teaching. There is that wonderful line at the end of Psalm 23 "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." The way I read those words for most of my life is that God prepares a table, in spite of my enemies- a table where I can eat and be full. The meaning is much different. The Hebrew words suggest that God prepares a table where enemies sit down together and feast.

The fourth verb Jesus gives us is to follow. "My sheep hear my voice and they follow me," Jesus says. We hear his voice and we are called to respond and to follow. It is important that this verb (to follow) comes last. There are times when we do not follow well. Emotions get in the way and we are not obedient; we do not love our enemies or our neighbors as ourselves. And if this verb were not last, we might think that God does not love us if we do not follow. Remember that this passage tells us that we are known completely and that Jesus gives us life. We hear his voice and then we follow. That is the order in which it works in my mind, and I suspect in yours. When I recognize that I am truly known and still loved then I can love the unlovable. The following comes after being known in such a way. The following comes after being given fullness of life. The following comes after hearing the shepherd's voice. Our

following calls us to respond to God’s voice, even when we are challenged to act in unforeseen ways.

### Affirmation of Faith

For Children: During the month of May, Lambie will help us learn the 23rd Psalm together.

Psalm 23:3b- 4 *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.”*

Have you ever seen a shepherd’s rod or staff? Every shepherd carries one because it is so important. Here’s a picture. The rod and staff, were both tools that Hebrew shepherds carried with them. The straight part of the stick is called the staff. The rod, or the curly part of the staff is used to keep the sheep safe. The staff is used as a guide and for rest. Sometimes sheep step away from the flock. The shepherd keeps the flock together by using the staff to guide wayward sheep back to the group. The shepherd also uses the staff as something to lean on when the ground is wet. He uses it to rest when he spends long hours tending the sheep.

The curly part of the staff is used to keep the sheep safe. A dog tried to bite my great grandewe and the shepherd used the rod to push that dog away. Once I saw a sheep fall into a hole- the shepherd used the curly part of the staff called the crook, to grab her around the neck and pull her back up to the path.

The verses today tell his that we do not need to be afraid because God guides us and leads us, like a shepherd, to safe paths. God protects us and loves us.

Let’s say the verse together again. Do you remember last week’s verse?

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.”

