

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
Amen.

Our sermon text today is written in John 10:1-10

Let us pray ...

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight;
we pray through Your son, Jesus Christ.

Sheep and Wolves

Who remembers the original story of Little Red Riding Hood, by original I mean the version that we probably wouldn't hear today; the PG rated, non-politically correct version; the one which doesn't end so well for Little Red and her Grandmother?

As you probably know, the story revolves around a girl called Little Red Riding Hood, who was named after the red hooded cloak she wears.

In the story a girl is sent out by her mother into the woods to deliver food to her sickly grandmother with the expressed command to stay on the path. As she is walking to her grandmother's house she is spotted by a cunning wolf who wants to eat her and what she is carrying. When he approaches Little Red she naively tells him where she is going, and He suggests that she should pick some flowers on her way, which she does. In the meantime, the wolf goes to grandma's house and by pretending to be Little Red Riding Hood manages to get inside where he devours Little Red's grandmother whole and waits for her, disguised as the grandmother.

When Little Red arrives at her grandmother's house, she notices that her grandmother looks very strange. And asks of her, 'Oh! grandmother, what big ears you have!' ('All the better to hear you with, my child'), Oh grandmother, what big eyes you have!' ('All the better to see you with, my dear.') 'But, grandmother, what large hands you have!' ('All the better to hug you with') and lastly, 'Oh! grandmother, what a terrible big mouth you have!' ('All the better to eat you with!'), at which point the wolf jumps out of bed, and swallows her up too.

Like I said – the original story wasn't the nice little fairy tale we have today, and the question I'm sure you're asking yourself is, 'what does Little Red Riding Hood have to do with our gospel reading today?'

The story of Little Red Riding Hood serves us as what is known as an allegory - meaning, it is a story which is interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning (although its meaning isn't really hidden all that deeply). Let me explain!

Within the story of Little Red Riding Hood we hear two things; Firstly there is the clear contrast between the safety of the village where Little Red lived and the dangers of the

wilderness she faced in the forest. Secondly, we hear of the consequences suffered by Little Red for disobeying the commands given to her.

So, to understand the allegory we need to look at the second half of it first, and to identify the context of this morning's Gospel reading. In the reading, as Jesus spoke, He was speaking to a group of people that consisted of a man who was born blind, some Pharisees, and a gathering crowd - and He spoke these words not all that long after He had given sight to the man born blind on the Sabbath.

We hear this account of the man born blind in the previous chapter to today's reading (John 9). In it we heard of a man who was born blind, and that Jesus performed a miraculous sign and healed the man and restored his sight.

But Jesus had performed this miraculous sign on the Sabbath and the Pharisees, rather than rejoicing that the man could see, were incensed that Jesus had worked on the Sabbath. For this they condemned Him, and the man who had received his sight, well, they threw him out of the synagogue.

Interestingly he doesn't seem overly concerned about this because his faith was now in Jesus and not in what the Pharisees taught. Jesus, at the end of the account condemns the Pharisees by declaring that, even though they claimed to have spiritual insight, they were spiritually blind. And because they insisted that they had spiritual insight, their guilt remained.

This is where Jesus begins to teach what we hear in today's Gospel. As Jesus says, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber,"* He was speaking directly to the Pharisees who condemned Him and who had thrown the man out of the synagogue.

The issue is that these Pharisees were supposed to be experts in the Word of God, but in reality they were experts in taking the Word of God out of context to suit themselves. Even though they memorized large sections of Scripture, they often misused it. They replaced the true meaning of Scripture with their own opinion. This is why Jesus calls them thieves and robbers.

This of course is not the only time we hear him say these things, in His frustration with the Pharisees, He rebuked them saying, *"You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men' "* (Matt 15:7–9).

Here we have the wolf of our allegory; he is someone who is both the false teacher and the false teaching, he is someone who will lead others astray. We still have these false teachers today ... teachers who will quote Scripture and then fill it with their opinions ... opinions that contradict the meaning of the very Scripture they quoted.

And the number of false opinions out there is vast, and they come in all shapes, sizes, and styles, there's one to suit everybody no matter what your preference. So, how can we guard against these false teachings? Well it's never easy, but it does become a little easier when you realize that all false teachings have within them one central teaching. In some way, shape, or form, they all teach that you are at least partially responsible for providing your own salvation. There may be all kinds of rituals. There may be all kinds of teachings. There may be many approaches. But, in the end, somewhere inside it all, you will hear a condition ... a condition that says, "When (or "If") you do something, then you will receive something." It all depends on you.

Often the teaching sounds so harmless and uplifting, but as soon as any part of the process depends on you, it is false teaching. It is the wolf telling you to go pick some flowers so that he can beat you to Grandma's house - or as the gospel said, it is a robber or thief trying to get into the sheepfold. Much like Little Red Riding Hood, the lies of false teaching free us up to sin, and lead us to death, and the power of the devil. As the author Jonathan Fisk says, 'never follow a rule that follows your liver, your heart, your pancreas, or any other bodily organ that could conceivably have its mind changed by the shifting of the wind'. In other words any system that depends in any part on ourselves will fail. In the end, we all must stand before our Almighty and Holy God and give an account of ourselves, and those who depend on false teaching will not pass the final test.

Thankfully Scripture teaches us a different way. It exposes us to God's holy law in all its severity. A lawyer asked Jesus, *"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And [Jesus] said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets"* (Matt 22:36–40).

These are the commandments that we must keep in order to earn our own salvation. And when Scripture says keep - it means that we are to keep them perfectly. That means from the moment of conception right through to our death ... one mistake and it's all over ... no second chances. Quite simply, Scripture doesn't beat around the bush, it clearly states, *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Rom 3:23). God's law clearly teaches that anyone who believes he can contribute anything to salvation is sorely mistaken.

Here is where the truth shines. When you come to the very painful, but yet very truthful recognition that you cannot keep any code of conduct perfectly, the only thing that false teaching can do is tell you to try harder ... to make your faith stronger ... to think happier thoughts ... and so forth. When you come to the realization that you cannot actually do that, then you are left with nothing but despair. But the truth offers a solution for that despair.

Now we come to the first half of the allegory, the clear contrast between the safety of the village in which Little Red lived and the dangers of the wilderness she faced in the forest.

In the Gospel reading this morning Jesus says, *I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.* And he also said to them *But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.*

Jesus has a different path to salvation for us. When it comes to our salvation God does ALL the work. Jesus purchased salvation for us with His holy life, His innocent suffering, and His sacrificial death, which we have just celebrated at Easter. We are His lambs, He has bought us at great cost. In fact, Jesus paid the ultimate price for us. He suffered the wrath of God against each and every one of our sins. Our salvation cost Jesus everything, but it costs us nothing. Jesus gives this precious salvation to us as a free gift.

What an image that we are given here, at night one of the shepherds would lie down in the opening of the sheepfold. He would literally become the door to the enclosure. No sheep could get out without stepping over the body of the shepherd, and no predator could enter to get to the sheep, unless it too would step over the shepherd. When Jesus states that *I am the door*, He is telling us that He is the Good Shepherd who guards the entrance to His flock with His body. This is such a powerful image when we realize that it is Jesus' body on a cross that saves and protects us from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

Martin Luther in his explanation to the Third Commandment states, "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God's Word, but instead keep that Word holy and gladly hear and learn it." Those who hear the voice of Jesus have a hunger that can only be satisfied by the Word of God. They do not see the study of the scriptures as a duty or an inconvenience, rather as a time to learn the sound of the Good Shepherd's voice. They see it as an opportunity to feed from green pastures and drink from still waters.

He is the one who calls us by name as the Holy Spirit works faith in us through the Word - when we hear the Word proclaimed and when we read it - when we feel the Word as it is combined with the water of baptism - and when we taste and smell the Word combined with the bread and wine of the Lord's Table. Jesus Christ is the true Good Shepherd who calls us by name and leads us in the paths of life everlasting.

Therefore, as we go out of the village and into the wilderness beyond, we can do so with assurance. Even though we may come across the wolf with all of his false teachings, we do not need to fear him nor his false teaching, because we know the sound of the Good Shepherd's voice. **Amen.**

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen**