

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

If you've read through the Gospels, you may have noticed that Jesus often refers to his followers as sheep. It's likely that Jesus is picking up on the imagery of the 23rd Psalm, in which God is described as a shepherd, who guides us all the days of our lives. Still, I know a lot of people don't like being referred to as sheep. Some are even offended by this image, and it's probably because it's been long assumed that sheep are just so dumb.

In fact, a derogatory term for a group of people acting dumb is "sheeple." So you might be surprised to know that scientists from Cambridge have proven that sheep are not actually that dumb. They actually have a high degree of intelligence within the animal kingdom. The researchers performed several in-depth studies with sheep, and it was demonstrated that the average sheep can recognize and easily distinguish between at least 50 other faces of their fellow sheep, or humans, or other species. The memory then stays with them for years. And that's a definite sign, the scientists say, of intelligence. Additionally, they found evidence that sheep are capable of a wide range of emotions, also a sign of higher levels of intelligence.

But there is a good reason why sheep are viewed as dumb by humans. And that's because sheep act incredibly dumb, very stupidly, when they become frightened. As herd animals, they will do very dumb things when they're fearful. That said, the lead scientist of the sheep study did offer the reminder that any animal, including humans, once they're scared, don't tend to show signs of intelligent behavior.

Now, we humans, we know we're the most intelligent species on the planet, but maybe, in part, our tendency to react so often and so blindly to fear is why Jesus decided to refer to us so often as sheep. And what about the good shepherd of the sheep? Jesus says the sheep know their master's voice when they hear it. Do we know the good shepherd's voice when we hear it? Because there are many competing voices in our world. And one of the most dominant and controlling voices in our society is the voice of fear. We in America have been called a culture of fear, where peddlers of fear appeal to our deepest anxieties in order to gain power and advantage.

Who are the peddlers of fear? The media. Politicians. Advertisers. Advocacy groups, among others. But there are certainly others in our lives, we know who they are, who are speaking fear into our hearts regularly.

And they may all have different reasons for peddling fear. But none of the reasons, at least in general, are terribly beneficial for you and I. News broadcasters and those in television programming, they need that sensational, often fear-inducing stories to focus on to ensure people will tune in, because we do tune into that stuff. And advertisers use fear in order to sell their products. Fear of some hazard, or an embarrassing or humiliating event, even danger itself. Ever since Edward Bernays applied the theories of his uncle, Sigmund Freud, and psychology, to marketing, here in the US it's been the case. In his 1928 book, "Propaganda," Bernays asks, "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it?" And the marketers say, "Yes."

Do you know there is a branch of psychology, it's now called Neuromarketing, and its study is the human brain's response to different kinds of advertising. They know what gets you, and they know that fear sells. Insurance companies are notorious for employing fears in their ads. Like those Allstate commercials with the character, Mayhem, right? She's showing up and every possible disaster that can strike at a moment's notice; I appreciate the barbecue blowing up at the tailgate. All those medical-related drug ads, they start out with some dire sentence like, "Every 30 seconds, someone dies of a heart attack." And let's not forget the commercials that make you fearful of being inadequate, or failing, or being publicly humiliated in some way. Deodorant and shampoo ads really have a corner on this. But the recent Bounce dryer sheets ad, it's very catchy, is a good example. It features Harry, whose wrinkled green shirt, he's standing in front of potential clients trying to present, and they're just completely unimpressed. And the commercial lyrics conclude with this: "If only Harry had used some Bounce to dry, yeah, he would be less wrinkly and winning at life."

In other words, wrinkly clothes can prevent you from winning at life. Yikes.

What about politicians? Fear can be used to get a politician elected. If they can convince you you're somehow safer with them? I mean, fear is used all the time in politics. It's used, for one, to get people to acquiesce to something they might otherwise oppose in order to keep those in power powerful and to continue to benefit those who are benefiting, financially and otherwise, and this tactic is not anything new. It's been employed for centuries, but it is really effective today. With mass media, it's as effective as ever and it really works the same in every country, where fear is used to control. And there's signs of it in all of our political dialogues, throughout our political landscape, fear being used to control, to help us determine what we will or won't do.

And my friends, we are surrounded on all sides by invitations to fear. Fear far beyond the healthy fears that humans should have, just to survive, right? Because certainly we have our own fears in life. We have fears about our health, our loved ones, our finances and death itself. But fear is such a powerful tool when it is used to manipulate as it so often is in our culture. And the fear peddlers sound a lot like those wolves that Jesus describes. Elsewhere he talks about them as being thieves in the 10th chapter of John's gospel. And they are those who fail to protect the sheep because, quote, "They care nothing for the sheep." The result of their actions is actually, Jesus says, to scatter the sheep. Fear can keep us off balance and usually more divided and scattered as a people. And so instead of coming together in a unified way, with Jesus' vision of unity, we are so busy and distracted protecting ourselves and fighting with one another out of fear, we don't even realize what the thieves are up to.

And so we sheep desperately need a reminder, and we need it all the time, I know I do, to ignore and even clearly oppose the many voices of those wolves and those thieves that surround us with fear. And instead to listen and follow the voice of the good shepherd. The one who calls us by name and leads us out, out of fear and danger, out of division into unity, where we may be one flock with one shepherd. Because the good shepherd, unlike those thieves, the hired hands, the good shepherd loves us. Instead of taking from us for their own personal gain, the good shepherd contrasts this with giving his life for us. And in God we really have nothing to ultimately fear,

because we are always in the hands of the one who loves us and will never let us go.

So whose voice are you listening to? Is it the voice of God? Is it the voice of the good shepherd? Or of those hired hands, of those thieves? What if we really let go of our fears, our panicked addiction to consumption, our shallow divisions as people, to see the deeper truth of being called to follow the voice that is beckoning us to walk the path of love instead? The voice that reminds us we are loved and calls us to love each other.

A friend relayed a story to me a few years ago about a discussion he had with his very young granddaughter about Dolly the sheep. You might remember Dolly was the first animal to be cloned by scientists, and this whole idea of cloning, including all the deep ethical questions around it, were totally over the little girl's head. She didn't understand it. But then, he says she asked a question that just seemed to get to the heart of things, and it struck him. She looked up at her grandfather and sincerely asked, "Do the people studying Dolly love her?"

He didn't know how to answer that. But that little girl's question, it does get to something important for all of us. Because there are many who seek to determine our destiny, our choices, are pushing us in certain directions, but it's only the good shepherd who loves us, who's leading us to those still waters and love is what really matters here, no matter what we're doing or what we're engaged in. God calls you by name in love. But sometimes we really have to stop and listen for that voice. To pray to hear the voice calling us above the clamor, above the fear, above the thieves and hired hands of this world. You wonder how you'll know the voice of the good shepherd from the others? You'll know it because that voice, that voice will lead you into peace on the path of love, even in the valley of the shadow of death. That voice will lead you to a place where goodness and mercy follow you all the days of your life. That is our shepherd. And you are called by name. So fear not. Amen.