

Hallelujah! Christ is risen!

This Gospel reading is partly what got me into ministry.

I first preached on it in 9th grade on Youth . Then again as a senior at Baccalaureate. And after 10 or 11 times in 31 years of ministry you'd think I was tired of it, but no. It is a favorite passage.

There is a farm near my house with newly-shorn sheep and lambs cavorting about. They are pastured within an electric fence. Not something I would want to climb over or through.

On my trip to the Holy Land, I saw Bedouin sheepfolds. They are large, somewhat circular areas with high rock walls – pretty easy for a thief to climb – and just one gate.

There might be 5-6 flocks in one fold and **the shepherd names each individual sheep.**

**And each sheep knows the voice of the shepherd.**

When one shepherd calls the names of his sheep, only those sheep will come from out of the mixed flock.

They follow him alone. Other shepherds may call, but they do not follow that one.

**They follow the voice of the one they belong to,** the one they trust to lead them to green pastures and still water.

There is another thing – you've heard the phrase “over my dead body”  
Shepherds take turns sleeping with the sheep – guarding the gate.

**Day or night, no one can come in through the gate without going through the shepherd.**

This is the image Jesus wants us to have when he says *“I Am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved.*

He is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep  
– he **guards the entrance to the fold for those who belong** and *against* those who come to do damage.

...

Congregation may eavesdrop as I talk to our confirmand, Hannah.

Hannah, about 15 years ago, Jesus baptized you and made you one of his sheep.

During those years, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus has led you in and out to good pastures –

- **You learned faith in your family,**
- **in your church,**
- **from the Bible,**
- **and from others.**

And like all very fortunate young people, your parents made sure you were participating in worship regularly – even when you would have preferred to do something else.

Today, you will stand before this congregation and say your own “Yes” to Jesus’ call to you to follow him as your Shepherd and Lord.

You will say “Yes” to following Jesus into abundant life.

And you will say “No” to following other voices –

- Be they *strange voices* that tell you
  - Jesus is false and some other thing is a better source of all good,
  - Or that reading novels is more important than reading the Bible (not knocking novels)
  - Or that worship is boring and irrelevant and of no use whatsoever
  - or that try to deceive you that having lots of things and going along with what everybody else thinks is better than following Jesus
- or be they *devilish voices* that cause you to doubt your worth and beauty,
- or *demonic voices* that tempt you to ways that
  - steal your joy,
  - kill your wonder,
  - and destroy your body.
- **To these you say “No” so that you can say “Yes” to Jesus.**

When you say “Yes” to Jesus, His is the voice you follow in everything you do.

You hear his voice in worship, when you read the Bible, when you pray.

You hear Jesus’ voice through the Holy Spirit in your conscience that guides you to choose this right and good thing instead of that wrong and bad thing.

You hear Jesus' voice through other Christians who

- worship
- and read the Bible
- and pray
- and put God's Word into action.

**The really important thing you say "Yes" to today, is to stay close to Jesus your Shepherd through your own worship, Bible reading, prayer, and obedient action.**

Jesus loves you dearly, Hannah, and he will always lead you to good things and good places

And he will always lead you back home to his fold.

He will never leave you alone.

Even when the places your Good Shepherd leads you are uncomfortable,

- like a big gathering of Christian youth with all sorts of commotion,
- or a soup kitchen with smelly people and no books,
- or a foreign country where you don't speak the language

**You can trust that Jesus will not leave you on your own or allow thieves and bandits to climb into your heart and steal your faith.**

He will always lead you back to the security of the church, the sheepfold.

Even if you go astray, Jesus will look for you until he finds you.

I know this from personal experience

– with large youth gatherings,

street ministry, and a visit to Tanzania.

Hannah, today you say “Yes” to following Jesus outside your comfort zone – and maybe even to losing your life in martyrdom.

God only knows!

But you say this “Yes” with confidence because of the promise

Jesus – risen from the dead – makes to you and to all of us:

*I have come that my sheep may have life and have it abundantly.*

When you say “Yes” today, Hannah, you promise to follow Jesus into a life that offers more than all the riches of this world,

More than all the status and popularity of this world

More than all the books of all the libraries in this world.

You follow Jesus into the **living story** that begins in the books of the library we call the Bible

and which continues in the life of the church throughout the ages, including right now.

**You, Hannah, are an important person in God’s story. A main character.**

In saying “Yes” to Jesus today,

affirming his choosing you in Holy Baptism,

**You promise to use the special gifts the Holy Spirit** has given you to write your own chapter in God’s story.

God has special plans for your gifts of reading, imagination, and building.

He will use your logic, keen intellect and perseverance to bring others into his sheepfold.

He will use your compassion and kindness to bless others.

Your “Yes” today means that you are open to the abundant good God deeply desires give you.

**Always remember this – -- Jesus says,**

**“Hannah, I have come so that *you* may have life, and have it abundantly.”**

Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, Hallelujah.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit , Amen.