Abraham Lincoln had an observation. He wrote, “The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep’s throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator. The wolf denounces him for the same act as the destroyer of liberty.” I mention this because in truth there is a sheep and a wolf inside all of us. One side of us wants to prudently restrict our freedom so to act like children of God and another side of us rebels against restricting our freedom so to cling to vice, which ultimately enslaves us. I like Bob Dylan’s lyric as an example, he sings, “Once I had the mountains in the palm of my hand and rivers that ran through every day. I must have been mad, I never knew what I had, until I threw it all away.” Also, I like the way U2 put it, “in New York freedom looks like too many choices.” I think that’s putting a finger on something very true that affects our spiritual journey. In society, in the malls, on the internet, and in our relationships, freedom can look like too many choices. Not all of them are good. Every so often we wake up recognizing that we’ve failed. We can’t shepherd ourselves.

Our Gospel passage reminds us that if we’re going to be part of Jesus’ flock we must know His voice and listen to Him. This means listening to Him even when we don’t want to, especially if the wolf inside of us would rather howl. Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. And this is good news if we are sold on the idea of being like sheep in the eyes of our Lord. On the other hand, this can be a tough message for us at times, because when it comes down to it, in American culture, who wants to be a sheep because the analogy of being a sheep doesn’t seem very attractive. Anybody who has been around a sheep will tell you that they are heavy, awkward, dim witted, and smell bad. What I find attractive about this analogy, however, is we all have things we deal with that are heavy, awkward, ridiculous, and smelly. In Scripture, what does Jesus do with sheep that are heavy, awkward, and smelly? Jesus takes that sheep and places it over His shoulders and leads the sheep back to safety, into the heart of a community, into the Church. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows and loves His sheep, who will even lay down His own life for His sheep!

The challenge, do we really want this? Do we want Jesus to embrace us like He embraces that sheep or do we find the wolf more attractive? Abraham Lincoln observed, “The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep’s throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator. The wolf denounces him for the same act as the destroyer of liberty.” In our culture, freedom at times looks like way too many choices and it’s not all good for us. At some point, this week, most of us will find ourselves surfing the internet and checking out websites. Take a little time to categorize what your reading or viewing and put them into three categories: good for my soul, neutral, and bad for my soul. Try it this week. It’s a good reminder. As you wander through the mall or shopping center, as you observe everything people are peddling there, you can categorize this or that: good for my soul, neutral, and bad for my soul. And during those moments, we can have a conversation with Jesus and listen to His voice calling us to better pasture, better choices, to what will ultimately make us happier in this life and the next….if we choose. It boils down to the problem of freedom, doesn’t it? If we use freedom well, it’s a blessing that leads us to God. If we use freedom poorly, we run into problems. We’re challenged to consider how society defines freedom and how Christ defines freedom. One definition can shepherd us to destruction. A better definition can shepherd us to salvation in Christ.