

Strength in Grace
2 Timothy 2:1-13, John 10:1-10
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
10-27-13

This morning, we are celebrating our very first Kirkin O' Th' Tartan Service, and I'm glad that we've chosen the coldest weekend of the Fall thus far people to wear kilts in worship. There's an old joke that says, "What does a Scot wear under his kilt? Shoes and socks." As far as I know, this is our first service celebrating our Scottish Heritage as a Presbyterian Church.

But, of course, there is a reason we're having this service today, and it's not just an excuse to wear plaid. The saying goes, "Those who don't know their history are doomed to repeat it," and we have a history worth knowing. Presbyterians have a history filled with spit and vinegar. Going back to one of our very earliest leaders, a man named John Knox, a minister and Scottish Reformer who spent almost two years in the belly of a ship as a galley slave by order of the Catholic monarch because he believed so strongly in God's Word plainly read and known by all.

Our reasons for celebrating our Scottish roots today are two-fold: first to remind us of the centrality of the Word of God to our faith. We were led into worship this morning by a procession in which the Word of God led the way. A long time ago in Scotland, there was often only one copy of Scripture, and each week it was carried into worship and guarded by the Beadle. Our Scottish ancestors cherished and revered the Word of God. You know, I often get asked, "Is your church a Bible-based church?" And I always cringe a little bit. Yes, we are a Bible-based church, in that we believe the Word of God is our rule for faith and life. But we're also a Bible-formed, Bible-centered, Bible-breathed, Bible-molded, and Bible-lived Church.

The second reason we're having a Kirkin service is to remember the passion for the faith our forefathers and foremothers had.

1. Bagpipes are a passionate instrument; there's no way to hide a bagpipe. I heard a joke someone once told that asked, "Do you know why Bagpipers frequently walk when they play? They're trying to get away from the sound." Just like bagpipes can't be hidden, so too our faith shouldn't be hidden either. Hopefully we are as out there and proud as these instruments, in tune of course.
2. As colorful as the plaid (or tartans), so should be the way that we communicate the faith with one another. I mean some Scottish tartans are really out there with colors going this way and that way. Going this way and that way and everywhere.

And that's why we're having this service today. And just as we are centering our service on the Bible itself as the bedrock of our faith, we are going to read a passage this morning that is arguably one of the most important lessons our Lord ever spoke. So as you are able, I invite you in a gesture of honor and respect to stand with me as we listen to the Word of the Lord.

“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. 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. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 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.

When the Good Shepherd’s voice speaks, the sheep listen. There is power in the voice of the shepherd. He or she has the ability to gather distant and wandering sheep into the path that leads to safety, to nourishment, and to life. In the midst of all the religious voices of the 16th century, voices that claimed rights of power, voices that co-opted nations and the church into a veritable melting pot of deception, the voice of the Good Shepherd still rang true in the ears of his sheep.

There is a story I read recently about a Palestinian woman who lost her husband in a recent conflict with Israel, and who was consequently in dire need financially. She went to the Israeli authority who had sequestered her family’s flock and pleaded with them to release the sheep to her. The officer pointed to a pen of hundreds of animals and scoffed that finding her livestock would be impossible. She asked if she was willing to separate her own small flock if he would allow her to take them. He agreed. A soldier opened the gate and the woman pulled out a small red flute and played a simple tune. Soon a few heads began to bob as they meandered their way to the gate, until all twenty five were gathered around her.

The ears of the sheep are specially tuned to the sound of the Shepherd. Our history as Presbyterians is not so cut and dry, but among the people of God around the world, there are perhaps none more gritty and tenaciously willing to follow that call.

By the sixteenth century, Scotland was a poor and backward country, caught in between England and France who repeatedly tried to co-opt and gain access to this little nation as a strategic land holding against the other. Year in and year out, the Scots were held under the thumb of more powerful Roman Catholic Crowns. That is, until a young 22-year-old Scottish student visited Wittenberg Germany, and then went on to study theology at the University of Marburg, where he heard for the first time the Word of God, plainly spoken and accessible to the average person. This young student who sat under Martin Luther, the forerunner of the Protestant Reformation, who proclaimed that it was by grace through faith in Christ alone that a person is saved, and not by the toil and work of his own hands, was a young man named Patrick Hamilton. And it was Patrick Hamilton who

heard the voice of the Shepherd and bravely took this radical new teaching back to St. Andrews and began to proclaim grace through faith alone to his fellow countrymen.

For the first time, this group of ragtag peasant Highlanders from Scotland was told that their lives were more valuable than what they would render as manpower to the French or English crown. And when a group like this gets a taste of freedom and liberty, watch, because they're going to change the world.

Not long after his arrival back to his homeland, Hamilton was executed for his message. But what began there with one brave 24-year-old, who became the first Scottish Martyr, snowballed into the Reformation Movement in Scotland. And it is the Hamilton Plaid that adorns our sanctuary this morning.

Jesus says in John 10:2-4 that Shepherds and sheep enter through the gate and not by any other way. This can be interpreted all sorts of ways, many very helpful. But what it boils down to, I believe, is that the gate by which we enter into the nourishing, prosperous, abundant life within the fold of the Shepherd is none other than by God's Word spoken and lived in the church. While John Knox was in exile in Geneva, Switzerland, he studied under the teaching of John Calvin, who distilled the true marks of the church down to the Word of God rightly proclaimed, and the Administration of the Holy Sacraments of Baptism and Communion. This is why our church has historically placed the utmost significance upon these things.

The power of the Gospel is on display when the Word takes root in people's lives. The Gospel of Christ crucified and the hope of resurrection when it is plainly spoken has the power to draw people out of their old lives and into a new and living hope. The Apostle Paul proclaims the power of the gospel in Romans chapter 1 when he says, **that the Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.** We have a new and living hope because of the promises offered to us in the pages of Holy Scripture. Nowhere else in history, no other founding document, or system of ethics or philosophy cares so much for the underdogs. The Bible is the Word to outcasts who then get brought close, foreigners who then become family, where the things of this world that are broken are made new, and that even a nation full of peasants like Scotland could rise up, as the Prophet Isaiah says, on wings like eagles because of the power in hearing these words.

In the HBO series *The Sopranos*, there is a scene where Tony Soprano, the powerful mob boss, is looking to secure more local waste contracts, so he pays a visit to the neighborhood pastor and community organizer. He's met at the door by the Pastor's frail elderly Italian father, who welcomes him in to have a seat. "My son will be right out," the elderly man says. After sitting down, Tony looks up and sees a picture of the father and his wife. "That you?" he asks. "Yep." "You were good looking back then." "Still am."

Then he looks over at the family Bible. "You believe what that book says?" "Sure do." Tony turns to him in an expression of intimidation and bodily says, "You know there's a lot of crap in the Bible." And the elderly father with an expression as icy cold as January

in Jersey says to Tony, “The only crap in that book was the kind that was coming out of Pharaoh’s *you know what* when Moses parted the Red Sea.”

There is life-giving power in the Word of God spoken in plain language. It has the power to shape life, to inspire life, to mold life, and to give life. In one of his only remaining documents, Patrick Hamilton writes these words: “Faith cometh of the word of God; Hope cometh of faith; and charity springs of them both. Faith believes the word: Hope trusteth after that which is promised by the word.”

In 1716, the British Parliament passed the Act of Proscription which outlawed clans from wearing their family Tartans. To remember and cling to their heritage as Scots, many would sew their plaids inside the liners of their garments, or pin a small swatch of plaid to their chest. It was as if they were writing their identity as Scots to the walls of their hearts.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, it says, **lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand. Teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.**

In other words, we get to know the voice of the Shepherd by reading and listening to his voice and writing his words on the walls of our hearts. And by doing this, what is it that we claim? We claim that we’re done trying to discover ourselves through this cause or that group. We’re done trying to define ourselves by the social circle we run in or how many diplomas we have on our walls. When we listen to the voice of the shepherd, he invites us to abandon these pursuits and realize that God has already given himself up for us, and that Jesus came so that we would have life and life to the fullest. The Word of God to you is none other than God saying to you, “Everything you could ever need in validation, or want in relationship, or achieve in success is found in completion with me. **I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life.**”

You know as well as I do, there is no end to the messages that would seek to derail us into fear and doubt. And brothers and sisters, let’s face it, we’re sheep. We believe too many of the lies, too many of the deceptions. And maybe right now you find yourself caught, in up to your eyebrows in a lie or a deception that has you caught and you don’t know how to get out. Listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, repent, pray for release, ask God to come and rescue you. I believe he will do it, because there is power in the Word of God.

In your bulletins this morning, you found a little card that says recommitment on it. We are coming into the time of year when we look at budgets and we look at finances and pledges for the coming year. Before we do any of that, I want to first invite you right where you are to look at your life and ask yourself: Is there an area of my life that is more

defined by the bottom line or the expectations of others than the voice of the Shepherd? Maybe it's your job, maybe it's your free time and what you do with it, maybe it's your finances. Whatever it is, I want to give you the opportunity this morning to listen to the voice of the Shepherd and rededicate that part of you back to God. On your card is space to write that, along with your name and contact information, and a little box that asks if you would like one of us to follow up in encouraging you in the coming year. I'm going to ask Rick to come forward and play quietly as we spend this time reflecting, and when the service is over as we are recessing out there will be a basket in the center aisle where you can drop your cards.

The shepherd is calling, gently and softly, inviting us to enter into his life and there find green pastures and still waters. Because the life he offers is not half hearted, but life to the full. Amen.