

“THE VOICE OF THE SHEPHERD”

John 10:1-11

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Series A) – Good Shepherd Sunday

May 7, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The appointed gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday of Easter is from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 10, verses 1 through 10. And we’re going to read one extra verse.

Technically, we’re supposed to wait until this Sunday next year to read verse 11, but that’s just an arbitrary and man-made rule, so we can break it without incurring any real guilt. And besides, it might be the best part.

You can find this reading on page 759 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From John 10, we begin reading at verse 1.

¹ “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. ² But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Dear sheep, sometimes we start a sermon by saying, “Dear saints.” This is to remind us who we are in Christ Jesus. And this is an overwhelmingly positive term—to be called *saints*. This is always true and appropriate, but today we say, “Dear sheep.” This also reminds us who we are in Christ Jesus.

It might not be the most flattering term. Sheep do not have a reputation for being the most intelligent animals. Nor are they known to be particularly ferocious. On the predator-prey spectrum, sheep are toward the “prey” end—just above grass.

So I do not expect you to feel flattered when I say, “Dear sheep.” But there is something very, very good about being a sheep. And it really has nothing to do with the nature of a sheep,

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but everything to do with our Good Shepherd. If you’re going to be a sheep, you might as well have a really good shepherd.

Jesus is that Good Shepherd who knows his sheep by name, calls to them, and leads them. He guards them from all evil, and leads them safely through the darkest perils of life and death alike. He spares no expense and holds nothing back. He values his sheep above all things, even his own life.

Jesus uses two different metaphors to describe himself in this text. First he says, “**I AM the door**” (10:7). He talks about shepherds entering through the door to the sheep pen and contrasts that to the thieves and robbers who try to sneak over the wall.

The sheep represent the people of God—those who are called “Israelites” in the Old Testament and “Christians” today. Then there are various kinds of people who are trying to get at the sheep. Some are shepherds, and some are thieves.

In the context of the Gospel of John, Jesus is starting to get in hot water with the Pharisees and other leaders of the Jews. In chapter 8 they were mad at Jesus because he claimed to be God (8:58-59). Then in chapter 9 they get mad at Jesus again because he healed a blind man on the Sabbath (9:16). Their hatred for Jesus is really unreasonable, so they are starting to reveal themselves as false shepherds. Then, at the end of chapter 9, Jesus calls them blind (9:39-41). And now in chapter 10, he pokes them in their blind eyes by implying they are not true shepherds of God’s sheep, but are really thieves and robbers. And the reason they are thieves and robbers is simply because they do not enter through Jesus.

Jesus is “**the door of the sheep**” (10:7). And anyone who tries to get at the sheep without going through Jesus is a thief and a robber. True shepherds always enter through Jesus. That is, they come in Jesus’ name, proclaiming the Good News of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Savior.

This is instructive both for pastors and for Christian lay people. The word *pastor*, by the way, simply means “shepherd.” A true pastor is someone who does not come to fleece the sheep or slaughter them or make a profit off them by some other means. He also does not come with his own opinions. He comes with the words of Jesus. That is what it means to come in Jesus’ Name.

So this is obviously instructive for pastors; it tells them what they are supposed to do. But it’s also instructive for Christian lay people. The sheep need to recognize the voice of the One True Good Shepherd in their own pastor. If they follow a fake shepherd, who is really a thief or a robber, their souls may be led astray or perhaps even killed.

This is serious. This is why you should all study and learn the Scriptures—so you can learn the voice of your Good Shepherd—that is, Jesus—and discern whether or not your pastor’s words are simply an echo of the Good Shepherd’s voice. Because it is not really your pastor who leads you. It is the Good Shepherd who leads you. Your pastor is really just another sheep, who has been called to speak to you the words of the Good Shepherd.

So this, as best as we can tell, is what it means when Jesus says, “**I AM the door of the sheep.**” The one who comes to the sheep through Jesus, speaking the words Jesus has commanded, that man is a true shepherd.

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Now, lest we think that pastors are our true leaders, Jesus uses a second metaphor to describe himself. He says, “**I AM the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep**” (10:11).

And if we stop and think about this for more than just two seconds, we might realize, that sounds kind of crazy. Who ever heard of a shepherd laying down his own life for his sheep? That doesn’t sound like a good shepherd at all. If anything, it sounds more like “the incompetent shepherd.”

If you’ve ever had a job that was even remotely hazardous, probably the first thing they taught you in orientation was safety. Even if you have a desk job, they teach you things like how to not stab yourself with a pencil. We hear the words “safety first” so often, they have become a cliché. Your job is not as important as your health. Everyone knows this. And unless you’re a soldier or a police officer or something like that, you are definitely not supposed to die at work. And even then, you avoid it as much as possible. The first rule of pretty much everything in life from skydiving to videogames is the same: *don’t die*. And it’s so obvious, that it’s rarely even stated. Don’t die. I mean, that’s pretty much the first rule of everything in life, because if you die, you can’t do anything else.

So when we read about this shepherd who willingly dies for his sheep—well, we feel kind of bad for the guy, because that’s a tragedy—but, seriously, how foolish can you be? As sad as it might be, that’s the pinnacle of incompetence.

A good shepherd does not lay down his life for the sheep—and for a variety of reasons. One, if the shepherd is dead, then the sheep are really defenseless. I mean, they’re only safe as long as the shepherd is alive. When he’s dead, the wolves can have their way with the sheep. And second, and most importantly, it’s just backward. The roles are reversed. In a typical shepherd-sheep relationship, there comes a point where the sheep die in order for the shepherd to make a profit and feed his family. That is the desired outcome of the shepherd-sheep relationship. The goal is to get a little wool along the way and eventually get the sheep to slaughter.

And if you happen to have sheep whom you learn are prone to wander, you might want to think about sending them to the butcher a little early—before they have a chance to get lost again. That’s what a good shepherd would do.

But notice, that’s just what *a* good shepherd would do. It’s not what *the* Good Shepherd does. “**The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.**” And it’s not incompetence. He knows exactly what he’s doing. And he knows this is the best thing to do for the sheep. He knows that he won’t stay dead forever. And he knows this is the only way to lead his sheep “through the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:4).

Whenever we read about the Good Shepherd, we naturally think of Psalm 23. It starts out so peaceful and serene.

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He restores my soul.

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He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.

Now that sounds very nice, doesn’t it? And it is. This is a picture of how our Good Shepherd provides for his sheep as he leads us through this life. But he doesn’t lead us from green pasture to green pasture forever. Eventually the green grass and blue water gives way to something black. The psalm takes a dark turn.

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me (Ps. 23:4).

So the psalm takes a dark turn as we “walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” And if our Good Shepherd’s return is further delayed, this is a valley we all must pass through at some point. But even then, we are not alone. Even then, our Good Shepherd is with us, and he leads us through it.

He is able to lead us through it because he has been there. He has passed through death and has emerged victorious on the other side. The Good Shepherd lays down his life, and he also takes it up again (10:17).

We think of death as being a very permanent thing. That’s how it looks. We see people die—a lot—but we don’t see them come back to life very often—at least not yet. So from our vantage point, as we all descend toward this valley of death, it looks very permanent. It looks like, once we get there, we won’t be coming out.

But, you know, Jesus descended into “the valley of the shadow of death.” But the valley was not deep enough to hold him. The shadow was not dark enough to prevent the Light of the World from shining again. Jesus passed through the valley and emerged victorious on the other side of death. He was dead, but he is not anymore. He lives forever.

Our Good Shepherd did not merely go *into* “the valley of the shadow of death.” He passed *through* the valley. And he did this for one simple reason—so that he can lead his sheep *through* this valley as well. All the way, the Good Shepherd leads his flock. It is not merely among the green pastures and the quiet waters that our Good Shepherd leads us. But even in the darker moments of life, including that darkest hour of death, our Good Shepherd leads us. So as we approach “the valley of the shadow of death,” and even as we pass into that darkness, we can say, “I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”

The sheep are led by their Good Shepherd all the way, so we cherish that word *through*. Notice this important little detail: the psalm doesn’t say, “Even though I walk *into* the valley.” No; it says something much more blessed: “Even though I walk *through* the valley of the shadow of death.” And you notice the difference. We don’t stay there. The valley is not deep enough. The shadow is not dark enough. Our Good Shepherd has passed through it, and he will lead us through it as well.

All the while we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, calling us and comforting us, saying things like, “Your sins are forgiven” (Luke 5:20), “I am the Good Shepherd” (10:11), “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (11:25), and many other comforting promises in his Word. All the

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way through, the Good Shepherd speaks to us through his Word. So we hear his voice and follow, knowing that he will lead us to where he is in our eternal home.

So the beautiful psalm continues.

- 5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

Now the sheep find themselves in an altogether different place. Who ever heard of sheep sitting at a table? And who ever heard of sheep dwelling in a house? Green pastures and still waters sound nice. But on the other side of “the valley of the shadow of death,” our Good Shepherd leads his sheep into “the house of the Lord,” and there we shall dwell forever.

The sheep hear and listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd. He knows his own. He calls them by name. He leads and guards his sheep at all times. Even in death he leads and protects his sheep. Because he has been there. He has passed through it and emerged victorious on the other side. So now he also leads and protects his sheep through the darkest valley of death, so that he might bring us through on the other side to dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.