

THE SHEPHERD AND THE DOOR

John 10:1-11

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Series A)

April 30, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 10, verses 1 through 11. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 10, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

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. ²But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”

⁶This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹I 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,

We are vulnerable. And I'm not just talking about you; I'm talking about me too. We are vulnerable. We are weak. We need protection. We are sheep, and we need the Good Shepherd.

We are vulnerable to being scooped up and taken away by the thief. Now, how exactly does the thief take us, or, at least, attempt to take us? Temptation. The devil tempts us into sin and unbelief. He tempts us to follow a different voice.

Temptation is one of those things that we don't understand very well. That's part of the nature of temptation. The devil does not want us to understand temptation, because, if we did, we would recognize his temptations, we would see the danger of them, and maybe we would flee from them. But we usually have a very simplistic view of temptation, while the devil is more strategic than we give him credit for.

We often think of temptation in terms of one individual sin at a time. Like there's this moment in time when there's something specific that you really want to do, but you know that it's wrong, but you really want to do it. And maybe you even feel like you have a mini angel on one shoulder, and a mini demon on another shoulder, and they're debating with each other. And we usually think of it in terms of one individual sin. But, that we would think of it so narrowly, is

also part of the temptation. The devil doesn't care so much about that one individual sin. He cares about what he can do with that one sin. He has an endgame, and it is to draw us into unbelief.

It might start with one sin. And that one sin might seem like it's not that big of a deal. We might think, *I've committed sins before. I've even committed this sin before, and nothing terrible happened. God forgave me for that sin, and I suppose he will forgive me again. It's just one sin.* To us it might feel like the devil wants us to commit that one sin, just because—I don't know—he wants bad stuff to happen. But one of the things the devil is trying to do is create shame in our hearts. If we commit that sin, shame grows. And if we commit it again, and again, and again, or if it leads to something a little bigger, and that thing leads to something a little bigger, then shame grows. And shame makes us hide from God.

Shame is false doctrine. Shame is when we believe that God will be disappointed in us or that he might not even forgive us. It's a false doctrine that motivates us to hide from the Good Shepherd.

There's a difference between guilt and shame. When we sin, we should experience guilt. Guilt is our consciences telling us that what we did was wrong. And the proper response is to acknowledge that we are wrong. But shame hides. Shame does not admit guilt, and this comes from the devil. But guilt, or what we could call "conviction," comes from the Holy Spirit. He works conviction in our hearts so that we will seek forgiveness from Christ. But the devil works shame in our hearts to make us hide from Christ. Shame is a false doctrine. It's thinking wrongly about God, so that we will not trust him. This is one of the ways the devil tempts us. It can start with one sin, but that's not really the devil's endgame. He's more concerned with our doctrine than he is with our actions.

It's like a chess game, where we might be thinking just about one move, but the devil is thinking several moves ahead. We're thinking about the one individual sin. That's the start of it. But the devil doesn't really care about that. That's just his opening assault. He's more interested in what comes after that. He's focused on creating shame in our hearts. He's focused on getting us to believe something false. All of this is so that he can draw us away from the Good Shepherd.

So we often think of temptation in terms of actions. But, I guarantee you, the devil is more concerned with doctrine. And by "doctrine," I mean the teaching of who God is and what he does. The devil wants us to believe wrongly so that we will not call upon the one true God and be saved. That is the devil's endgame.

He tempts us in many different ways. Some of them are obvious, like when he starts with something we know is a sin, and he uses it to build shame. Some are less obvious.

There are a few different voices. In this passage, Jesus speaks of shepherds, and he speaks of the Good Shepherd. He also speaks of thieves, and he speaks of the thief. There is the voice of the Good Shepherd, and there are little shepherds who echo that voice. But there is also the voice of the thief and his little thieves.

The Good Shepherd is Jesus. He's the one who loves every sheep. He protects all of them. He guides them. And he even lays down his own life for them. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Then there are other shepherds, or what we could call "little shepherds." These are pastors, and we should also include Christian parents in this. These are people whom Jesus calls to care for a part of his flock. The little shepherds are also sheep; they are members of Jesus' flock. But in this image, they care for the sheep in Jesus' name. They come to the sheep through the door, and Jesus is the door.

THE SHEPHERD AND THE DOOR (John 10:1-11)

A door is an entrance to some, but a wall to others. To the sheep, and to those little shepherds who come in Jesus' name, he is an entrance. But to the thieves, the door is just the same as a wall. Anyone who tries to get at the sheep without going through Jesus is a thief and a robber. But those who come through Jesus are true shepherds. To enter through Jesus means that they do not speak a different voice. They echo the voice of the Good Shepherd. Jesus has truly called them to shepherd his sheep. So 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 Good Shepherd in their own pastor. If they follow a fake shepherd, who is really a thief and a robber, their souls may be led astray or perhaps even killed.

This is one of the thief's less obvious temptations. If he can mimic the voice of the Good Shepherd, or if he can make his voice sound more appealing, then he might lead away the sheep. The devil does not often tempt us in obvious ways. From the very beginning, he has tempted God's beloved creatures by making evil look good and good look evil.

He preaches prosperity. He says, "God loves you, and he wants you to be prosperous and successful." This sounds appealing. Who doesn't want to be wealthy and successful? And it sounds right that God would want us to be happy. But it's a false voice, leading us to love money above the one true God.

The devil take other good things and tempt us to elevate them above the one true God. Maybe you play sports. That's a good thing. Maybe you have a job. That's also a good thing. But maybe you have to do it on Sunday morning. And maybe it starts with sometimes, but then it becomes a lot. Will you love that good thing more than the one true God? Maybe you have a lake cabin. That's also a good thing. But maybe it means you don't go to church in the summer.

Perhaps you can find a way to do both. You can find a church near your cabin. If you're traveling for sports, you can find a church in that town. Maybe you can adjust your work schedule. But if you can't, what are you going to do? What will you fear, love, and trust in above all things? Whose voice will you listen to?

Now, you should not think that going to church is a good work that checks your weekly box with God. That's not the point. The point is, *where do you hear and learn the voice of your Good Shepherd?* We can and should hear and learn it at home, in daily Scripture reading. But the first and primary place is still in a congregation, with a little shepherd and the other sheep. This is where we hear and learn the voice of the Good Shepherd, and this is how he protects us from the thief.

And I hope I'm not being self-serving when I talk about this. I'll admit to you that I feel better about myself when I see more of you here. But that's not the point. If anything, I talk about this less—probably less than I should—because I'm afraid of appearing self-serving. The point is this: you need to be in church, hearing and learning the voice of the Good Shepherd. Anything that draws you away from here is the voice of a thief.

The thief also tempts us by making God look evil. He does this in many ways. One way is what he's doing in the transgender movement. He's tempting people, especially children, to

despise their own bodies. But that's not the biggest danger. The biggest danger is to believe that, if my body is wrong, then the God who created this body can't be right. It's the temptation to believe that the God who created male and female can't love me. But this is wrong. This is very, very wrong. The way God created your body is right, and he loves you, even if you don't love yourself. Even if you don't like the way God created you, and even if you hate him for creating you the way you are, he won't stop loving you.

And the devil tempts us to follow false saviors. Perhaps the biggest way he does this is through the religion of politics. It might start with a desire for justice. We see injustice in the world, and we want to stop it. This is good. We should desire justice. But then we put too much faith in a party or a person, and it happens on both sides. We look to them to make things right, and we expect them to be able to do more than they really can, so we follow their voice instead of the voice of our Good Shepherd. Or you might associate the God of the Bible with the people on the other side of politics, and you think, *If they're wrong, then their God can't be right*. And this voice makes you despise the voice of the Good Shepherd.

There are many different ways the devil might tempt us. Maybe I didn't hit the one you think is the worst. But maybe I hit the one you needed to hear. In all of this, the devil's endgame is not that we would commit one sin or believe one wrong thing. His endgame is to make us follow a different voice. He uses that one sin or that one false belief to draw us away from the Good Shepherd. The devil can't drag you into hell by getting you to commit one sin or believe one little lie. But he can tempt you to follow a different voice, so that you do not call upon the one true God for salvation.

If you're taking what I say seriously, you may think that this world is a very dangerous place. If the devil is this crafty, and if he has still other ways to tempt us, then we are very, very vulnerable. And this is true. The danger is extreme, and the stakes are high.

But the one who protects us is far stronger than the one who tries to steal us. We have a Good Shepherd. He knows his sheep, and he calls you by name.

Jesus uses the metaphor of a sheep pen to teach us this. The way shepherding worked in ancient Israel was that you didn't just have a big fenced in pasture that you let your sheep roam around in. Instead you had open pastures for everyone and a communal sheep pen. So multiple shepherds would use the same pen at night to keep their sheep safe, and there would be a watchman who stayed there overnight. That way you didn't have to supervise your sheep twenty-four, seven. And there was only one door to the pen. Everyone who went in and out legitimately would have to go through that one door, and anyone who tried to jump the fence was obviously a robber, trying to avoid the gatekeeper. So in the morning the shepherds would go through the door, call their sheep, and lead them out of the door so they could find pasture. The shepherd would lead them from pasture to pasture, grazing as they went. And at night the shepherd would take them back to the sheep pen, where they would sleep safely. So in the morning, when the shepherd led them out, the door meant they were about to get food. And in the evening, when the shepherd brought them back in, the door meant they would sleep safely. So when Jesus calls himself "the door" it means that, through him, we receive both nourishment and protection. And this especially refers to spiritual nourishment and protection. It is through Jesus, the Word made flesh, that our spirits are fed, and it is through Jesus that we are protected from the evil one, the devil.

THE SHEPHERD AND THE DOOR (John 10:1-11)

Jesus is our Good Shepherd. Everywhere we go, or at least everywhere we are *supposed* to go, Jesus leads us. And when we wander away, he seeks us and finds us. He actively leads us through this life. He feeds us. He protects us. He calls us by name. This kind of shepherding was far more intimate than other ways of raising livestock. When you used a communal sheep pen, you had to know exactly what sheep belonged to you, and they had to know the sound of your voice. Everything depended on the shepherd knowing his sheep, and the sheep knowing his voice. That way, when you went to get them in the morning, you could call to them, or sing your little tune, and they would come to you. This way you didn't steal your neighbor's sheep. It wasn't like having one big fenced in pasture all to yourself, where all you need to do is count your sheep to make sure they're all there. Sheep were not just a number to these shepherds, but the shepherds actually recognized and knew each one, and the sheep knew the shepherd. This is the way Jesus describes his relationship to his believing saints. You're not just a number to Jesus. Jesus knows your name, and you know him. It's personal.

So far, everything Jesus has been saying fits with ancient shepherding, but it takes a really weird twist when Jesus says, "**The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep**" (10:11).

I mean, why do shepherds raise sheep? Occasionally sheep are raised merely for their wool. That is, the shepherds fleece the sheep. But most of the time, shepherds raise sheep for the purpose of killing them. This is how shepherds make a living. The sheep lay down their lives, not of their own accord, but at the will of the shepherd. And I suppose the sheep have no idea this is going to happen. They just figure the shepherd is a really nice guy who takes good care of them. But then the shepherd comes one morning, and he turns out to not be a very nice guy at all, at least, not to them, not anymore. This is what every earthly shepherd does. But our Good Shepherd does the exact opposite. He lays down his life for the sheep.

Usually it's a bad thing for the sheep if the shepherd dies, because there's no one left to take care of them. If a shepherd lets the wolf kill him, then the wolf is just going to kill the sheep next. But Jesus lays down his life in order to save his sheep, and he takes it up again to live forever as our Good Shepherd.

He leads us through his Word. That's his voice. That's where he speaks to us. We know the Good Shepherd by his Word. In the Holy Scriptures he tells us where the dangers are, he teaches us who he is, he teaches us what he has done for us, and he teaches us where he is bringing us. That is the voice of our Good Shepherd. He laid down his life in order to redeem us from death, and he took it up again so that he can lead us through this life, through death, and into his eternal home. Amen.

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