

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Gospel reading for today comes from the Good Shepherd Chapter of John's Gospel. Every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, the Church celebrates "Good Shepherd Sunday." So, on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, welcome to "Good Shepherd Sunday."

In Chapter 10 of John's Gospel, Jesus speaks some of the most powerful and comforting words in all the Bible. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, He knows His sheep and His sheep know Him...

These are some of the most well-known words of Jesus in the Bible. They are often times read at funerals or at the end of life. Why? Because it is both powerful in its imagery yet comforting in its truth.

This morning I'd like for you to consider the imagery and consider the truth.

In 1st century Palestine, shepherds were low, very low, on the societal totem-pole. There are rabbinical writings that listed shepherding as a discouraged profession. Simply put, anyone who aspired to great things, would not aspire to be a shepherd. They were lowly, impoverished, nomadic, dirty. They smelled like livestock. They were uneducated. Only a very simple and or humble person would ever desire to be a shepherd.

It is in this context that Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." I hope you know this is marvelous news if for no other reason than the God of the universe identifies himself as your caretaker. And more than that, He is concerned about those who have wandered off, those who are simple minded, those who are dirty, and those who have gotten themselves in trouble. And by affirming these things, Jesus presents

himself as someone who is not afraid to be condemned by those who think very highly of themselves.

I'd would like to point out that in Chapter 9 Jesus has just restored the sight of a man born blind in which the Pharisees had claimed the man was blind because of his sin. After all of the back and forth debates between the Pharisees and the man and the Pharisees and Jesus, after all the discussion over spiritual blindness and sin... It is into the midst of this question over sin, and who's in, who's not, who's receiving judgement, who's not; it is concerning these very questions that Jesus responds with the Good Shepherd Chapter.

Jesus identifies himself as the One the prophets said would shepherd God's people. And more than that, He identifies himself with the words of David in Psalm 23.

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.

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

Many years later Ezekiel prophesied,

“I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹² As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶ I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak”

The title was nothing new. It was well founded in Old Testament Biblical imagery. The only problem was that people who knew it well... wanted nothing to do with shepherds. Maybe so, but although the title fell out of use, Jesus owned it.

In Chapter 10 Jesus uses the title for himself and in doing so He preaches a harsh rebuke against anyone who would Lord their position over anyone else.

Woa to anyone who is supposed to be leading, supposed to be healing, supposed to be caring for, supposed to be suffering with, and is not. Woa to anyone who is not preaching God's word, Woa to anyone who is not nourishing people with the Gospel. Jesus says those people are not shepherds. They are thieves and robbers... and the sheep know it. They know my voice and they flee.

The constant refrain in John 10 is that the sheep know my voice. I call them by name and they follow me.

Do you hear Jesus voice? Do you respond and follow him? I don't say that to be sarcastic or cynical. I just think sometimes it is helpful to have honest reflection. I've been asking myself those same questions all week long.

How do you know it is Jesus voice?

I have read there is a technique that I imagine has been around for a long time that when young lambs are being trained the shepherd will call "come" to the lamb and while he is doing that he will rattle a bucket of feed. Whether the shepherd is about to do something painful like tend to a wound, or administer a shot, or whether the shepherd is about to do something wonderful like feeding them, they learn through repetition that their shepherd intends to care and nurture them even when they do

something the sheep does not necessary like at the time. (My dog Cooper hates it when I cut his nail and clean his wrinkles and ears, but what's the alternative? Nails that curl and cut into his paws? Wrinkles that become inflected and stink, ear inflections that become itchy and hurt? Understand I do things, that neither or us like, because the alternate is far worse.)

To be honest, I imagine you have been hearing the Good Shepherd's voice since before you ever recognized it. Some of you heard the Scriptures being read to you from within your mother's womb. You heard your Good Shepherd at your baptism, and on that day, your Good Shepherd said, "you are my beloved." And he said, "Come. Follow me."

Ever since then, you have heard him say over and over again, "you are forgiven." And "Behold I have redeemed you with My own blood."

The point being, Jesus speaks, again and again and again, and every time He has given what you needed most. Sometimes healing, sometimes nourishment, sometimes forgiveness, sometimes reassurance, but each and every time, he gives you life in his Name.

Did you know the valley of the shadow of death talked about in Psalm 23 is actually a real place?

If you go out of Jerusalem east toward Jericho there is a large canon and in it there is a very narrow roman road only wide enough for two men could walk side by side. It is a real place... the valley of the shadow of death. It is narrow and rugged, and almost always full of shadows. Jesus also referenced this road in the parable of the Good Samaritan. On this road a man was robbed and striped and beaten and left for dead. The road was notoriously dangerous. Because of the rugged terrain

people could be ambushed. And it is likely that King David knew of this place as he was taking his sheep out to pasture.

⁴Even 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.

Through those words David takes us into a dangerous, rough, dark, narrow, valley. David says that is what my life is like. David says that is what your life is like. We walk down dangerous and difficult terrain, through places that are feared, and rightly so. Metaphorically, this could be a place of depression or doubt. A place of sin and shame and guilt. A place of addiction or despair. Or a place of loneliness or death. Simply notice and Psalm does not say the Lord will take his sheep out of the valley of the shadow of death, or around it. What he does say is he comes along side of us.

What is the alternative? The alternative is you could walk this road alone. But that is not what happens for Jesus' sheep. Jesus comes along for the journey, even though it is dangerous, and it is a place that is frightening... it no longer needs to be. Because we have our Shepherd.

“Behold I am with you to the very end of the age.”

The Gospel lesson says the people did not understand what He was saying because He was using figures of speech.

So Jesus put it this way: “I am the door of the sheep.”

What does this mean?

In middle eastern shepherding, even today, it is common to shepherd in a field during the day and have a pen where you keep your sheep during the night. The pen may or may not have had a gate. Either way the shepherd would function as the gate to let in who he lets in and to let out only who he lets out. In the absence of an actual gate and shepherd would sleep there in the gap.

I am the door of the sheep. With this Jesus is saying he has placed himself between you and every danger. Between you and the darkness and between you and sin. Jesus has placed himself between you and the devil. And between you and death.

He is saying that he has reached out his arms on the cross. He was pierced and laid His life down for you. He did all of that, so that you would be pure and holy and redeemed and that you would bear his name and be free to graze in green pastures.

Graciously and gloriously, our Good Shepherd laid His life down, and on the third day He raised it up again on Easter. But more than that, on this day he promises that resurrection reality is true also of you. In the meantime, he also promises to be with you and to guide you from this pasture all the way to your final good pasture.

In the grace of God, which surpasses all understanding, trust your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus Amen.