

April 21, 2024
Fourth Sunday in Easter

“Hearing Shepherds”

John 10:11-18

At first glance our Gospel reading today is just that; Gospel, good news. Especially with Psalm 23 echoing in the background we read this rightly as Jesus being more than shepherd, more than king. “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil” is to see Him as the Savior and God of steadfast love that He is.

At the time He spoke the words in our Gospel lesson, the crowds, the Pharisees and even His disciples were perplexed by this. Of course they were! The significance of “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*” is completely lost on them, but not us! This reading appears in the season of Easter for a reason! We know that Jesus has laid down His life for us by the cross and taken it up again by the empty tomb, having all authority over sin, death and the devil to save us for eternity! He is risen!

When we speak of Jesus as our Good Shepherd we understand the many ways that name works. We see Him as pictured in our beautiful window here and those wonderful sweet pictures in Sunday school—a caring shepherd who loves His sheep, doting on them as a parent loves a child, always desiring what is best for them. We also see Him as our warrior shepherd, who willingly faces our enemies in battle to save us, who can’t hope to save ourselves, body and soul. And of course we see Him as our King Shepherd, the Lord King David spoke of, that greatest of Israeli kings who began as a brave and dedicated shepherd of the flock. Jesus is all this and more.

Yes, our Good Shepherd Lord is all Gospel good news indeed!

Yet, as a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod trained preacher, I am bound to proclaim the law as well as the Gospel. In this particular passage you cannot find any law concerning Jesus, the Good Shepherd. But you don’t have to look far...because there are the sheep.

Jesus says of those other sheep, “*I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.*” That’s great, but what is quite clear in John 10 is that there are other, lousy shepherds who sheep are listening to. And therein is where I can proclaim the law: Beware! Thou shalt not have any other shepherds!

Well, duh. This much should be obvious to any believer, and I guess it really is, but we still struggle with it because sheep can be pretty dim-witted sometimes. Worse than that, we can be rebellious, hearing the voice of other shepherds, listening and then running away from the true shepherd and eagerly following lousy ones.

Why? Well, I think our beautiful stained-glass window here gets it right. Jesus looks lordly and loving and wonderful. The sheep? They look like some nasty little buggers, don’t they, with those squinty, angry eyes? That one looks like it’s ready to bolt from Jesus’ arms the first chance it gets.

That is us according to our fallen, sinful nature. Our flesh, as Saint Paul would say, is plagued by sin so when it hears the shepherd’s voice it bristles. Nasty sheep don’t like a lot of the stuff the Good Shepherd has to say.

“But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

We know without a doubt from Christ’s own example that we are called to love in such a way. But our inner sheep is selfish and nasty. It hears Christ’s voice as giving harsh orders and

making unreasonable demands. It bristles at the idea of sacrifice or service to others. We'd rather listen to another shepherd, that of worldly wisdom, that says "You deserve what you have and it's yours. Let them take care of themselves." That shepherd seems to make perfect sense, but that certainly isn't loving like the Good Shepherd loves us.

I could take this nasty sheep metaphor further and talk about how we quickly and maybe even eagerly fall into temptations toward evil and sin. That's all true and Satan most assuredly calls out with a sweet-sounding voice trying to lure us into following as he shepherds us into darkness and eternal death. Beware indeed.

But Psalm 23 and this passage about our Good Shepherd are really all about love—the love our God has for you, us, His entire fallen human creation. To rightly hear the Good Shepherd's voice is to hear the good news Gospel of our salvation. He is not causing you loss in the world. He is not stealing away what is precious of life. This shepherding thing that He is doing? It is Him guiding you through this life full of snares and traps and evil things seeking to destroy you. The stuff of this life you are called on to sacrifice in love? That stuff doesn't endure to eternity. It's all God's stuff anyway. You've just been privileged to manage it to His glory...because He loves you.

People saved by God, hear your shepherd's voice for what it is—complete and steadfast love for you calling you into His kingdom where here in time your sins are forgiven and peace with your maker is restored and there into eternity absent all sin, pain and sorrow of this life, replaced by perfect and abundant life in the glory of Jesus Himself! It is all Gospel good news as He is all Gospel good news!

"They will listen to my voice." Jesus says this of His sheep of the one flock and one shepherd.

If your conscience is being prompted to bug you about some situation in life it would be a good practice to pause and ask, "To whose voice am I listening?" Is it human reason? Is it your own selfishness? Is it Satan's voice of temptation? Is it the world and this life claiming paramount importance over all things?

Think about it and recognize if it is any other shepherd than your Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Then seriously contemplate which shepherd is leading where.

It's not a tough call. Only one shepherd laid down His life for the sheep. Only one shepherd took up His life again and has the authority to give you that same resurrection. Only one shepherd did it all so that you would always be His beloved lamb.

Amen.