

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, MAY 3, 2020

Easter 4A 2020 John 10:1-11 “A Real Shepherd for Real Life”

Dear fellow sheep of the Good Shepherd, Christ is risen! This morning’s readings are an interesting combination, that at first blush, seem, somewhat contradictory.

First, we heard in the Introit Jesus’ wonderful words: ***I am the good Shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me, and I lay down my life for the sheep.***

Those words remind us of the words of the 23rd Psalm, with its green pastures, still waters and safeguarded walk through the valley of death. And we think: Yes, it’s good to be a lamb in the flock of the good Shepherd.

And the reading from Acts that seemed to confirm the goodness of being part of the flock. What a great picture of the Church! ***They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.***

And we think: there was unity and harmony, gladness and growth. That must’ve been the “golden age” of the Church. ***How good*** it must have been to have been in the Church back then.

But then we heard from Peter, and we heard something completely different! Something not so good, we would say. For Peter speaks not of the green pastures and silent waters that we like, and says nothing of unity and harmony and peace – he instead talks about ***suffering unjustly . . . and doing good and suffering for it.***

And then most scandalously of all, he says ***this is the way of Christ, the good Shepherd; this is [our] example, that [we] might follow in his steps.***

So, which is it? What is the Christian life like? Is it one of peace or persecution? Serenity or suffering?

Many want to know, and you can find any number of preachers that will tell you what you want to hear.

There is no shortage of voices in our world today, all vying and trying to shepherd you. But they are not the gate for the Sheep, and they will not lay down their lives for their sheep. In fact, they will lead you into the valley of death by preaching false doctrine and passing it off as the word of the Good Shepherd.

And even faithful undershepherds’ need correction at times. So, the question is not *which* shepherding voice will you listen to, but which is the voice of your true, Good Shepherd?

Before we go on, however, we should address a couple of misperceptions, which will help us resolve these apparent contradictions.

First, while we do not know exactly when David penned Psalm 23, we do know that his life and reign as king of Israel was not all green pastures and silent waters! There was plenty of sin, political intrigue, a mutiny by his own son, and suffering. Hardly an ideal era to live in or an ideal people to attempt to lead.

And as far as the early church goes – well, it was really more bloody than golden. The apostles were arrested and flogged and martyred. Saul was rounding up all the Christians he could find.

There were internal disagreements and problems, from the church in Jerusalem

to the church in Corinth, which was a real mess.

No, wherever there has been the Church, there Satan has been attacking her. Whether it was in the Garden of Eden, first century Jerusalem, 21st century America, or any time in between.

And one of Satan's favorite tools is getting us to doubt either our own faith, or God's promise. And so, know that if you are suffering, or doubting, during this time of Pandemic, you are in good company.

Brothers and sisters, the Christian life is not a life free from suffering and doubting, nor it is it a life without problems or pain – it is rather as Jesus described it in the Holy Gospel.

For there He brings together problems and peace, suffering and serenity, altogether in one true realistic picture.

Thus, here Jesus gives us true hope. Not the false and unattainable hope of reproducing a never-existent golden age in the Church, or of having a life free from problems and struggles – but a life of hope and joy in the midst of these things, even while suffering for doing good.

The life He gives us is an abundant life, even in the face of relative scarcity, because God's gift is of peace is one that surpasses all human understanding.

And so, Jesus doesn't flatter us with smooth words or lure us to join His club with false promises and grand ideas of transcending the troubles of this earthly life. No!

He puts us right down in the midst of this life and says: **Yup. This is what it is.** The Church is like life in a sheepfold. Sometimes its crowded and smelly. Sometimes we find sheep we don't like so much. Sometimes there are fights among the sheep.

Sometimes we don't feel like being shepherded, and want to go off on our own.

But do you know what, Jesus says?

You're all My sheep. Because I bore your sins in My body. You're mine because I died that you might live. I created you, and I redeemed you. You are mine, and I love you.

I love you when you're good, and I love you when you're not so good. I will discipline you when you need it, but I will bandage your wounds when you're hurt, and I will go after you when you wander off.

I will protect you, and give you all that **you need** for your life. I do not promise you "sheep paradise" – your own pasture, your own stream of water without other sheep tramping in it, or your own private, luxurious sheepfold.

No, but I promise you myself.

I promised that I **will never leave you or forsake you. You are not only mine – I am yours. PAUSE**

I dare say that what I just outlined for you is a radically different picture than many have of being a Christian. But then Jesus adds to that also, by talking of thieves and robbers that climb into the sheep fold. **Yup – this too is the way it is.**

These are the Satanically inspired false prophets, false teachers, false churches, false promises, and false thinking of the world, that try to lead us away from our Good Shepherd.

These false shepherds want to take us away from Christ, by hook or by crook.

While they talk a good game, the end result of their false teaching is to make us disappointed with Christ, or disillusioned with His Church, or to go after the mirage of something that looks better.

And yup, they're not only outside the sheepfold, outside the Church – they climb inside also, and cause a ruckus.

And perhaps we think of when this happens is this: well why not just build bigger walls around the sheepfold! Higher and stronger! Better defenses is what we need.

And why does Jesus let them in? Why doesn't our Good Shepherd keep them out?

Well, first of all, bigger, higher, stronger walls don't work.

Jerusalem was a city built on a hill, with big, high, strong walls. But Jerusalem fell – but not because of the armies from without, but from the sin within its walls.

The armies from without simply fed the fear and doubt, the idolatry and spiritual adultery, that was causing decay from the inside out.

And so something *more*, something greater, than walls is necessary to protect the sheep: and that is, namely, the voice of our Shepherd.

For while walls may *seem* better and stronger, in reality they cannot give us what we need. Only the voice of our Shepherd Jesus Christ can do that. For He and His work for us are the Gospel.

It is His voice that declares us forgiven. And that forgiveness of our sins, our hearts begin to heal from the inside out.

When we listen to His voice, we do not follow the strange voices of the thieves and robbers, but flee from them.

It is His voice that comforts and calms us in the midst of trials and confusion, cutting through the darkness with His light, His reassurance and His truth.

It is His voice that comes to us and calls to us when we have wandered and are lost.

It is His voice that strengthens us in weakness, when the darkness is the deepest, that we know that He is there.

For He who created us, and came to us in our sin, even to death on the cross, will not now leave us on our own.

We have His Word on it! And through that Word, His voice is still calling out today, calling sinners to repentance, to receive His life-giving forgiveness.

His Word came to us and made us a child of God through Holy Baptism, giving him faith, and forgiveness.

And His Word that feeds still today. His Word that says ***This is My body*** and it most surely is; and His Word that says ***This is My blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins***, and it most surely does.

And through these means, these words, this voice, Jesus is serving as the Door – bringing sheep into His fold, His Church, and providing for us all that we need.

Whatever He does not give we do not need, and whatever He *does* give it exactly what we need. What we need to have ***life***, and to have it ***abundantly***.

But what does that mean? **To have life abundantly?** Having life abundantly is

different, I think, than having an abundant life – although that’s a common confusion today.

For we think that life consists in the abundance of what I have, what I do, what I can accomplish and accumulate.

But that’s not what Jesus is saying here! ***He does not promise an abundant life, but that we will have life abundantly.***

And that is more than simply filling up our puny little lives with things that are here today and gone tomorrow! Rather, it is to make our life more than we ever thought or imagined it could be. The life that God designed especially for you.

And if it takes trials and troubles and struggles and crosses to give you that life, then that is what your Shepherd will do.

But, as Peter said, this is **a gracious thing** – a working of God’s grace for us. For truth be told, **we like** our puny little lives and our puny little pleasures and our pet sins.

But that is not good enough for your Savior/Shepherd. He has come to give you more. And maybe He has to pry your cold, dead hands off your old life and sins in order to give you His life.

If so, thanks be to God! He is not punishing you, but saving you. Calling you. Teaching you. For that is the kind of Shepherd you have.

So do not fear, little flock. You have a Good Shepherd. You are Jesus’ little lamb. For the sheep the Lamb has bled, and died, and lives again. And in Him, so will you.

The **thief may come to you to steal and kill and destroy**, but even if he succeeds in taking your mortal life, he still has lost!

For Jesus gives life from the dead. And the life that He has given to me and you, will never be taken away. For it is life that is not only abundant, but also eternal. And we know this because HE IS RISEN! And He is the great Shepherd of His sheep.

Amen