

Easter 4 / April 25, 2021 / The Good Shepherd

John 10:16

“They will listen to my voice.”

Today is the Sunday of the Good Shepherd. In our Psalm King David looked back on his youth, when he was shepherd to his father’s sheep and sang, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” He realized that everything he had done as shepherd for the sheep his father entrusted to his care, the Lord did for him and for all the sheep of His flock, the people of Israel. He sang, “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” Shepherds were important people in the economic and religious life of ancient Israel. Although they were not ranked among the high and mighty, they were essential workers.

Shepherds were entrusted with the care of an important source of food and clothing. Sheep were worth their weight in wool, which was sold for profit and was used to make clothing and bedding for the children of Israel. Sheep were sacrificed in the temple to make atonement for the sins of the people. And of course, each year the little lambs were sacrificed and eaten at Passover, as a reminder of the Lord’s deliverance of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt.

Shepherds received minimal pay and little recognition relative to the responsibility entrusted to them. They were the perfect embodiment of the Lord’s presence among His people, for the Lord looks highly upon those whom the world looks down upon and considers lowly. His delight is not in the strength of a man, but rather in a heart that clings to Him in the humility of faith. Jesus’ nativity was announced first to shepherds. Shepherds were the first to see the infant Jesus. Shepherds were the first to proclaim the Saviour’s birth. Isaiah sang, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news.” The shepherds were the first of many who ran to tell the good news of the Saviour’s birth and salvation through Him. Through their witness and the words of the apostles and evangelists we listen to His voice and follow His call.

In our gospel this morning and in the verses around it, Jesus identifies Himself with shepherds and with His heavenly Father, the great shepherd of the sheep. David sang, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.” David as a youth, risked his life for the sheep and protected them from lions, bears and wolves. Jesus laid down His life for the sheep as the lamb of God, who bears and takes away the sin of the world, to save us from the most dangerous predators: sin, the devil and eternal death! Most importantly, Jesus took His life up again. This was good for Him, but especially good for us. His rising is testimony that God accepted His sacrifice for our sins and that in Him, we have forgiveness and the certain promise of sharing in His resurrection to a new and eternal life in His Father’s house. He calls us by name. We listen to His voice and follow His call.

In our text Jesus distinguishes between a good shepherd and a hireling. The hireling is a shepherd by occupation, but not by vocation. A hireling is entrusted with the care of sheep, but for the hireling, the sheep are nothing more than a means of making a living. He does not love them, or have any concern for them beyond the pay he will receive for bringing them to market when they are fattened and ready to slaughter. If a hireling saw a wolf coming, he would leave the sheep to fend for themselves and run for his life.

Jesus once asked a question saying, “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in open country, and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” The owner of the sheep would take care to prevent the loss of even one sheep, but a hireling would consider one an acceptable loss. But to a shepherd who loved the sheep, even if he didn’t own them, the loss of even one sheep, would be unacceptable. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He loves the sheep. He seeks to find and to save the lost. He lay down His life to save His sheep from the greatest predators; sin, the devil and eternal death. We listen to His voice and follow His call.

Jesus is shepherd after the pattern of David, who as a youth, cared for his father Jesse’s sheep; and later as an adult, cared for his heavenly Father’s sheep, the children of Israel. When Jesus called Himself the good shepherd, He wasn’t just identifying Himself with shepherds in general. He wasn’t simply expressing God’s concern for the poor and lowly, the essential workers. He was primarily identifying Himself with David, as the heir to his throne; and with the heavenly Father, as His Son from eternity. In Ezekiel chapter 34 the Lord said, “And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and He shall feed them; He shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken.”

The Lord wasn't speaking of reviving David and restoring his kingdom. He was speaking of the position David occupied, as shepherd of the people of Israel. At the time of Ezekiel, David was dead and had long ago been gathered into the Lord's house. The passage was instantly recognized as a messianic prophecy, in which the Lord promised to send a shepherd greater than David, as king. Jesus is David's greater descendant, the Son of God from eternity. He claims a throne and establishes a kingdom that will endure forever. He established His kingdom, by laying down His life for our forgiveness. He claimed His throne, by taking His life up again for our salvation. We enter His kingdom by listening to His voice. We abide in His kingdom by following His call. A few verses after our text Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish and one will snatch them out of my hand." We listen to His voice and follow His call.

Shepherds trained the sheep in their care to recognize their voices and to follow their call. The sheep would become so accustomed to the shepherd that they would recognize his or her voice, no matter how distant or faint; and immediately respond to his or her call. Children recognize their parent's voices and can pick them out of a crowd when they call their names, especially if they use their full names. Spouses recognize each other's voices and can identify each other in a loud room. I was at a social event. A man was playing cards with the men at one end of the room. His wife was playing cards with the women at the other end of the room. At a certain point the gentlemen became frustrated with the cards he kept getting dealt and began to get a little loud. His wife recognized his voice over the din in the room and quietly, but firmly, spoke his name. He heard her voice, listened and quieted his voice.

We especially recognize the voices of people who love us. When they speak our name, we know that they are calling because they have our best interest at heart. No one loves us more than Jesus. No one speaks to us more lovingly as Jesus through the gospel call. No one will speak our name as tenderly as Jesus, when He calls us to rise to life. Jesus calls us to life now, through faith in the gospel of forgiveness. Jesus calls us to live each day in faith, in the gospel of forgiveness. Jesus calls each of us to follow Him in faithfulness, through the gospel of forgiveness. Mary Magdalene recognized Jesus in the garden when He called her name. We recognize Jesus as our Saviour and Shepherd when He calls to us through the gospel of forgiveness. We listen to His voice and follow His call.

No one has a voice as powerful and as effective as Jesus. He is the Word of God, through whom all things were made and in whom all things are held together. He is the Word who clothed Himself with our flesh and shares our humanity. He speaks the words of God, not as a prophet, but as the Son of God. When He calls with divine authority every knee will bow in heaven, on earth and under the earth. When He calls through the gospel, He touches our hearts with the compassion of forgiveness; invites and empowers us to respond with faith. He calls us and every human soul to come to Him in repentance through the gospel of forgiveness. His sacrifice was for the sins of the world and His call is for every human soul. We listen to His voice and follow His call.

He was sent first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but as He said in our gospel, He has sheep also of another fold, that fold is the non-Jewish peoples, whom the Jewish people called Gentiles. Unless we have some Hebrew DNA in our ancestry that includes you and me. His love is for you and me. His love is not bound by racial, social, economic, or any other human distinctions. He died for all. He rose for all. He calls all to come to Him through faith in the gospel of forgiveness. He will not turn anyone away. He calls us to come. It was to draw all people to Himself in forgiveness and to make peace with the Father through His cross that the Father sent Him.

He makes all who hear His voice and follow His call, one with the Father and one with each other through the blood of His cross. In the Nicene Creed we confess, "I believe in one holy, Christian and apostolic Church." Despite the divisions that exist within the church on earth and there are many, there is one flock and one Shepherd. Jesus is our Shepherd! He is the Good Shepherd, who lay down His life for our forgiveness and took it up again for our salvation. We hear His voice in the gospel of forgiveness. We know His voice by His words of grace and peace. God grant us to listen to His voice and follow His call, until He calls us from this life to rise in newness of life and dwell in His Father's house forever. In Jesus' name. Amen