

Sermon for Sunday, May 3, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia! We sustain that accolade thru these seven weeks of Easter, testifying to the truth of the risen Lord. Today our Savior, who has gone from death to life, is presented to us as the Good Shepherd. This is the Sunday when we would normally read Psalm 23, sing hymns like The King of Love My Shepherd Is and other Good Shepherd type hymns. We'll have to wait until next year for that to happen again. However, that won't prevent Jesus from coming to us today as our Good Shepherd!

Today's text from the tenth chapter of John is written when Jesus is confronting and confronted by some leaders of Israel. Some of them accuse Jesus of being a blasphemous demon. Jesus, in return, identifies them as blind strangers in Israel who steal God's sheep. How's that for name-calling! Jesus illustrates a picture where there is a sheep pen with a gate, sheep, a shepherd, and thieves. The pen helps keep the sheep safe from wolves and from wandering away and getting lost. It's good for the sheep to be in the pen. But Jesus says that wolves aren't the only danger to the sheep. Thieves and robbers also want to get at the sheep and climb over the fence, get in, and use the sheep to their advantage. However, the shepherd enters the pen the normal way – through the door/gate – and brings the sheep out. In real life, there would often be sheep from several different flocks all kept in the same pen for simplicity and economy. When a shepherd would come to get his sheep, the gatekeeper would know him as one of the shepherds, open the gate, the shepherd would call his sheep, and that shepherd's sheep would recognize his particular voice, separate themselves from the other animals in the pen, and come out to him. Pretty neat!

The problem in this example, of course, is all those thieves and robbers who hurt the sheep. They are not the rightful shepherds, so the gatekeeper will not open for them. They must climb over the fence to get at the sheep. These intruders are not qualified to be among the sheep. Today, there are many systems used to make sure only qualified people can work with people. Doctors go through many years of education and residency and then must pass board examinations before they are certified to practice medicine in the hope that they will help people rather than hurt them. Engineers who build bridges must be educated in their field and certified so they know how to build a bridge that will be safe for people to use. In church denominations such as ours, there is a careful process of development of men for the pastoral ministry through seminaries, internships, and examinations leading up to ordination. And after all that, our pastors are still bound to and accountable to the scriptural teachings and practices our church knows to be true as passed down from the Lutheran Reformation some 500 years ago. This is our way of trying to keep thieves and robbers from getting in at the sheep of our congregations, as happens so often in churches that have no such controls.

The "chief thief" of course, is Satan; *"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."* (1 Peter 5:8). And he has help; *"The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."* (Revelation 12:9) Yikes! Jesus reveals the purpose of this thief and his minions; *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy."* (John 10:10) That's their purpose, but how do they accomplish it? They accomplish it by leading people as far away from Jesus, the Good Shepherd, as possible. In society they establish false religions and/or governments that prohibit the practice of the Christian faith. They also put ideas into people's heads that the material world happened by random chance through a process called evolution, thereby removing the image of God from his highest creation and making humans no more important than a blade of grass. Personally, they remove the complete cure for guilt through Jesus Christ that he provides in baptism, confession, and holy communion. When people cannot rid themselves of the inner turmoil guilt creates, they are either deceived into grasping onto a false hope, or they fall into the darkness and despair that comes from

never knowing that God loves and will accept them no matter what they've done. I'm not sure which is worse, but both are equally fatal.

Enough with the bad news. Let's get to the good news! Jesus says, *"I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture... I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."* (John 10:9-10) Jesus is both the door (gate) of the sheep pen AND the Good Shepherd. We get into the pen through faith and trust in him as our Good Shepherd. Here, the explanation to the second article of the Apostles Creed applies; *I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won [delivered] me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death,..."* Amen to that! There's more; *"...and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."* (John 10:3) When God gives us such faith to trust in Jesus, he then calls us by name. When parents have a child, one of the first things they do is name it. They get to pick the name because the child belongs to them. By faith in Christ, we are born again, and God also gives us a new name because we belong to him. The sheep fold may be large in number, but God still has an individual relationship with you personally.

Jesus also says he leads us out. Out where? This is where the words of the Good Shepherd Psalm now apply; *"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters."* (Psalm 23:2) In this life of ups and downs, the green pastures may consist mainly of the peace of mind and spirit we have knowing God is in control, is directing our lives according to his purpose, and will never abandon us to the thieves and robbers who seek to devour us. But there is much more to come, to which the Psalmist alludes; *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* Psalm 23:6 That's a great note to end on. Jesus is our Good Shepherd. Through him we are made part of his fold and he calls us by name. He provides for us and guards us in this life and will lead us into the greener pastures of our heavenly home. As he does all this for you and more, the peace of God guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus as you believe and trust in him. Amen.