

2 May 2004
Easter 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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"The Voice of Our Shepherd"

Text: John 10:27-28 (Revelation 7:9-17)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

"The Lord is my Shepherd." This is one of the most comforting and beloved pictures of our Saviour for many people. The rustic, country scene, peaceful and serene. A green meadow, lush pasture, crystal clear streams. Protection, rest, care, and rescue. My shepherd and me.

But that's not terribly realistic, is it? **It's not at all what life is like!** Our lives are rarely peaceful and serene, but busy and hectic. We get challenged and confused. We're more often stuck on the Beltway than we are relaxing in green pastures! Life throws us curves. Crystal clear streams are replaced with lead-contaminated water. And how often do we feel alone? . . . But even so, this picture of Jesus as our Good Shepherd is no fantasy or pipe dream. It just needs to be *translated* to fit our everyday lives, and to provide the comfort to us that God intended. And that's what the Holy Gospel for today does. For there is the Good Shepherd in real life.

Those verses begin with Jesus in the Temple for the Feast of Dedication, the time the Jewish people celebrated their freedom from the domination of the evil foreign emperor named Antiochus Epiphanes. Now, being ruled by a foreign power was certainly nothing new for the people of Israel – we read in the Old Testament about many different times when they were conquered and forced to serve a foreign king. But Antiochus Epiphanes was a special case! He was one of the most evil and ruthless rulers of that time. His name meant Antiochus, the "enlightened" one, and in addition to his tyranny, he tried to "enlighten" the Jewish people by setting up an altar to Zeus in the Temple. . . . And so, when the people were able to gain their freedom from this tyrant, it was a time of unparalleled rejoicing. And not only that, but all this didn't happen much before Jesus arrived on the scene. It was all still very fresh on the minds of the people.

Now when Jesus arrives on the scene, the Jewish people are again under the rule of a

foreign power – this time, Rome. And as Jesus is walking in the Temple area during this Feast when the people are remembering their freedom, a group of Jews, we are told, **"gathered around"** Jesus. They surrounded Him, so He couldn't get away. They wanted to make sure He answered their question. And they ask Him: **"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."** Or in other words, if you are the Messiah, the Saviour, who is going to free us from the rule of Rome, *like we are remembering on this holiday*, what are you waiting for! Tell us! Or better yet, do something! And Jesus responds: **"I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."** . . . Well, that being clearly not what that group of Jews wanted to hear, we are told right after this that they immediately picked up stones in order to stone Jesus to death.

But why? Why were they so dissatisfied with, and even angered, by Jesus' answer?

Well there are a number of theological reasons I could give you, but I want to focus your attention today on just one. It is perhaps the simplest reason, but it is also the most important. **These Jews were listening to different voices; wrong voices.** For listen to Jesus' answer to them again: **"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."** Or in other words, Jesus is telling them *"You are not My sheep because you are not listening to My voice. You do not believe what I am telling you and are believing and following other voices. The problem's not with Me – its with you!"* . . . And since no one likes being accused and told the problem is with them, they tried to stone Jesus.

But the point Jesus is making here is important – especially for us today. *For what voice, or voices, or you listening to?"* That's an important question to answer because there are a countless number of voices in our world today, all trying to grab our attention, all trying to get us to listen to them, all trying to get us to believe what they are saying and follow them. . . . And over against them is the voice of our Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, who says: **"My sheep hear my voice . . ."**

So who or what are you listening to? Is it the voice of **popular opinion**, telling you to get with the times? Is it the voice of **pragmatism**, telling you to do what's only practical, what everyone else is doing to get along? Is it the voice of **reason**, telling you that God isn't being reasonable, or fair, with you? Is it the voice of your **old sinful self**, telling you to go ahead and indulge your desires, and that you're really not so bad? Don't worry

about that repentance and forgiveness stuff so much. Or maybe for you it's the voice of **the path of least resistance**, or the voice of **success**, or the voice of **freedom**, or the voice of **compromise**, or what other voice? There are so many. . . . And you see, that's the problem! We don't live in a green pasture by a cool stream of water where it's easy to hear the voice of our Shepherd on a lazy afternoon! We live in a world where we are quite literally being bombarded with all these different voices everyday! All telling us all different things, all wanting us to follow, and all leading us in different directions!

And we may choose to listen to those other voices; Jesus does not force us to listen to Him. And as we do (*for we always do!*) perhaps our lives are easier for awhile, or more exciting; or perhaps we are more popular, or well off, or gain some amount of pleasure . . . But the other voices in this world never ultimately deliver what they promise. They take more than they give. They lead us astray, and then they leave us lost and alone.

But there is one voice that is different than all the rest. ***“My sheep hear my voice.”*** That is a command for us to listen, yes – but what makes this voice different is that this is also a promise. The promise that His sheep will never be without His voice. Other people, other voices, other things in this world will use us and then leave us lost and alone, *but not this one.* ***“My sheep hear my voice.”*** They will always hear my voice because it will always be there for them. Death could not silence this voice, for He rose from the dead. His voice did not leave in His ascension, for He commissioned and sent out His apostles and pastors to speak in His stead and by His command. ***“My sheep hear my voice.”*** They will always hear my voice. The voice of the Good Shepherd. The voice that is different than all the rest.

And this voice that says what no one else says. It doesn't flatter you with false praise or false promises to get you to follow. It is simply the voice that says: you are a sinner, and the Good Shepherd has come to lay down His life for you. A worldly kingdom He has not come to give you, but a kingdom not of this world. It is a kingdom you cannot enter by yourself, but only through the forgiveness of your sins. It is a kingdom of faith, not of works. It is a kingdom which will never end. . . . You do not deserve such a Shepherd. But He is here for you. In the midst of this chaotic world with all of its voices, He is here for you. And He speaks. He speaks the truth. The truth about you, and the truth about Himself. You may not like the truth, but it is not up for vote. But as He speaks He is being your Good Shepherd. ***“My sheep hear my voice.”*** His voice, His Word, which creates His sheep! His Word which created this world is His Word which creates faith in your heart. And this voice that has saved you, that has re-created you, you know. It cuts

through the confusion, telling you not what you must do, but what He has done. ***"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."***

And so we follow – which does not simply mean that we are obedient, law-abiding sheep. No, we follow His voice where He leads us. We follow His voice as He calls us back in repentance, to receive His forgiveness. We follow His voice as He calls us to remember our baptism, to be washed clean. We follow His voice to His altar, to be fed by His body and blood once hung on the cross. We hear His voice, telling us of His love, of His sacrifice for you, of His faithfulness, of His care . . . And so even though we live in a rough, dog-eat-dog world and not in a lush, green pasture, the peace can be the same. The peace of knowing that I am a sinner and a failure, but that I am forgiven. The peace of knowing that through this forgiveness, I will and can never be separated from my Shepherd, my Saviour. The peace of knowing that just as He lives, so I too will live. *And not just here and now.* For your Good Shepherd gives you what none of those other voices can give you. ***"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."***

You know, the Allstate Insurance Company calls themselves “the good hands people.” But miss a payment, or file too many claims, and then what happens to those “good hands?” . . . But not so the hands of your Saviour, your Good Shepherd. Those He gives life, He keeps. To those who hear His voice, He promises eternal life. Which means not just life in Heaven when you die, but life already here and now. Real life. Life as it was meant to be. Not as the world tells us it should be and that we should chase after – but life as God created us for, as our Saviour redeemed us for, and as the Holy Spirit has called us for. That even as we live in a changing, dangerous, and uncertain world, we live with peace, confidence, security, and trust. For we hear His voice. He has defeated our old, wicked tyrant, Satan, and has set us free.

Until the days comes when we are called from this world; when it will be asked about us: ***"Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? . . . [You] are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. [You] have washed [your] robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore [you] are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter [you] with his presence. [You] shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike [you], nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne [is your] shepherd, and he [has] guide[d you] to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from [your] eyes."***

Dear friends, there is only one voice that leads to that promise . . . and you know that voice. ***"The Lord is my Shepherd."***

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.