

30 April 2023
Easter 4 / Good Shepherd Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Door of the Sheep”

Text: John 10:1-10; 1 Peter 2:19-25; Acts 2:42-47

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] Alleluia!

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

One of the most important things about John chapter ten is that it comes after John chapter nine! How’s that for a revelation? Thank you, Captain Obvious. But I mean that, with all sincerity. The chapter divisions in the Bible were not part of the original text. They were added later to help make it easier to look things up. So instead of saying: *the teaching of Jesus about Himself as the Good Shepherd is in John*. Where? *Uh, about half way through*. You say: *chapter ten*. That’s helpful. BUT . . . these divisions were not always put in the most helpful places. And today, with the separation of chapters nine and ten, is one of those times.

For when Jesus says (in verse one of chapter ten, as we heard today), ***Truly, Truly, I say to you*** . . . that’s not coming out of the blue. He is responding to what has just happened. In chapter nine. And what just happened at the end of chapter nine is that the man born blind that Jesus healed - which caused no small amount of commotion - had gotten thrown out of the synagogue. Because he wouldn’t deny Jesus. Because he wouldn’t call Jesus a sinner. Those demanding that answer, *they* were the gatekeepers, and this man, they said, could no longer come in.

Now, on the one hand, there was some truth to that. The priests of the Old Testament, for example, *were* gatekeepers. They were tasked with distinguishing the holy and the common, the clean and the unclean (Leviticus 10:10). They were to protect the holiness of God, so that the holiness of God wouldn’t hurt the people, and the uncleanness of the people wouldn’t defile the holy places in the Temple. So that God dwelling among His people - which is what the Tabernacle and the Temple were for - would be for their good. You see this in the New Testament when after healing lepers, Jesus tells them to *go show themselves to the priests* (i.e., Luke 17:14). So the priests could do their job and declare them clean.

Now with the rise of the synagogue - a place not of sacrifice, but of teaching - it is the Pharisees (the really smart, educated, lay people among the Jews) who were acting as the gatekeepers here. The problem was they were not being faithful. They were not teaching in truth. Maybe they thought they were, but they were not. They were, in fact, as Jesus

said, **thieves and robbers**. For they were all about the Law, all about rules, instead of being all about *the One* who all those Laws and rules pointed to, and were supposed to be preparing the people to receive. So when Jesus came along, instead of recognizing Him as the Messiah, they saw Him not as the fulfillment, but as a threat. A threat which must be eliminated. Which, as we remembered a few weeks ago, they did.

God had spoken through the prophet Ezekiel about this (chapter 34). He calls out the so-called shepherds of Israel. They have been abusing the sheep. They have only been feeding themselves. He says of these so-called shepherds: *You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them* (Ezekiel 34:3-4). And then God says through Ezekiel, because of all this: *I Myself will rescue [or save!] my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. . . . 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* (vs. 22-23).

Now when Ezekiel said that, David, King David, had already been dead for hundreds of years. He was not talking about *that* guy . . . he was talking about the promised Son of David, the one who would sit on David's throne forever, the one David was a pointer to, a picture of - the Messiah. The one, who would be God Himself. And that one is, of course, Jesus.

So when Jesus says, ***I am the Good Shepherd***, He is saying that He is the Son of David, that He is the Messiah, that He is God. And when He says, ***I am the door*** (or sometimes that is translated as gate), He is saying that **He is the gatekeeper**, the one who opens and closes - not the door of the Temple or Tabernacle, or the door of the synagogue, but the door of heaven. His sheep enter through Him. Trying to get in any other way, like through keeping the Law and being good, makes you a thief and a robber - trying to get something that doesn't belong to you. Because the kingdom of God is not something you can "get" - it can only be given to you. By Jesus.

So when the man born blind is thrown out of the synagogue, Jesus, the one who healed him, becomes his Good Shepherd. Jesus searches for him and finds him and takes him up and brings him into his fold. Jesus came that this man ***have life and have it abundantly***. And now he not only has his sight, but what is even better: He has eternal life. And the Messiah He sees now with new eyes, he will see forever with risen eyes.

As will you! For Jesus has come that you ***have life and have it abundantly***. He wants you to have life and eyes to see now, yes, but even more, to have eyes to see eternally. He doesn't want you to only have a nice, big, beautiful house now, but a mansion forever (John 14). He doesn't only want to feed you now and care for you now, but for you to have a seat at His heavenly wedding feast that has no end. And so He is your Good Shepherd, *meaning* He has searched for you and found you and taken you up and brought you into

His fold, His Church. You didn't do any of those things - He did. For you couldn't, no more than a man born blind could give Himself sight. *He* baptized you. *He* sent His Word to be read and preached to you. *He* gave you parents and friends to do so. *He* sent and put a pastor here. That you hear His voice and know His voice and follow His voice. And have life.

But one more thing was needed for Jesus to be ***the door: He had to open the door of the grave***, the grave that will one day shut us all in. Without that, we have life for a while - 60, 70, 80, 90 years or so - but then it's all over. But for a Good Shepherd, that's not good enough. So He came *not just* to open the door of the grave - that sounds too nice and easy! He came *to kick it down. To obliterate it*, so that there's no way for it to hold us in, and we need have no fear of it.

So as your Good Shepherd, who searches for you and finds you . . . how to say this? When He does, He doesn't find a nice, clean, obedient, innocent, gentle little lamb. *He finds you!* All dirty and filthy and disgusting with the sin you've been rolling around in again this week, disobedient, rebellious, disrespectful, going your own way, not wanting to listen, wanting to tell God what is good and true and the way He should do things, focusing and spending your time and energy on the things that really don't matter, instead of the things that do. Wandering off . . . how often?

But a Good Shepherd doesn't turn His back to you or brush you off - He loves you. So when He finds you, He cleans you off, washes you in baptism. He gives you a new heart and mind and Spirit (cf. Ezekiel 36). And He takes you up and brings you into His fold, the Church, so that you can continue to receive His care and washing and teaching and feeding and Spirit. And He says: all that disgusting dirt and filth you had when I found you, all your rebellion and disobedience, I'll take care of that. You are free. Free from all that. So that you can live, live not weighed down by your past and regrets and failures and mistakes, but live a new life. For I have come that ***you may have life and have it abundantly***.

And Jesus did take care of all that by going to the cross for you. He paid for what you did and gives you what He did. He dies your death that you have His life. And then as we celebrated three weeks ago, He kicked down, obliterated the door of death and the grave, and rose to life again. And His sheep will follow Him. Death will not be the end for you. Life will. Life from the dead. So that like that man born blind who would see Jesus not just for a while, in this life, but forever, in eternal life, we who hear our Good Shepherd now will hear Him not just now, for a while, but forever. With not just a new heart and mind, but with a risen one.

Peter, as we heard earlier, put that truth this way: ***[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness***. That we live not the same old life, but a new life. ***By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls***.

And then, as we heard in the reading from Acts: **They** - [the Christians], the ones Jesus found - **devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers**. Which is to say: they devoted themselves **to Jesus**. To their Good Shepherd *who was first devoted to them*. Because to be devoted to **the apostles' teaching** is their teaching about Jesus. To be devoted to **the fellowship** is to be devoted to the Church, which is body of Christ. To be devoted to **the breaking of bread** is to be devoted to the Supper of Jesus' Body and Blood. And to be devoted to **the prayers** is to be living in Jesus' flock, listening to Him, and speaking to Him. It's all about Jesus. They were all about Jesus because He was all about them.

So that's the key for us, today, too. If we really knew and believed that Jesus was all about us and always doing good for us and is our one and only Good Shepherd and the true Door to heaven, would we live as we do? Would we despair as we do? Would we keep looking for life in other people, places, and things? Would we worry so much about what doesn't really matter, and worry a bit more about what does? Could it be said of us that *we devoted ourselves to the apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*? If that's true for you, praise God! If not, repent. Because your Good Shepherd is here for you. To wash you and forgive you and feed you and speak His Word of life to you. He is devoted to you even when we're not always devoted to Him. He is truly good, truly life, truly *for you*. And not partly or at times, but always and completely. From manger to cross to grave to life.

So what a joy Good Shepherd Sunday is! To hear this once again. And to sing it! That *for the sheep the Lamb had bled* (#463, v. 2). That *the King of love my Shepherd is* (#709). That *I am Jesus' little lamb* (#740). And that Jesus is *the Lamb upon His throne . . . who died eternal life to bring and lives that death may die* (#525, vs. 1, 4). That in His flock and with His care we have nothing to fear, not even death itself, for **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] So you, too, have a chapter ten! You are not on your own. And even if the world throws you out, for you, too, the door, the gate, is open!

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.