

The Door and The Shepherd  
John 10:1-10  
Fourth Sunday of Easter  
May 3, 2020

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

Our text, Jesus says, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

When we've been sheltered-in-place for 50 days and our stress level is high and thoughts and emotions are frazzled and maybe we've even endured some bouts of depression, we need a gospel reading and Scriptural image as comforting as this one, don't we? The Good Shepherd. Is there any more peaceful and comforting expression of God's promises in Christ Jesus than the promise that He is our Good Shepherd. Yes, when we've been locked away and scared for our safety and fearful for our neighbor's health and worried about society's stability, we can think on that image of the Noble Shepherd who always promises to safeguard His sheep.

Perhaps we don't find this morning's reading to be the most *beloved* of this 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John and its focus on the Good Shepherd. *Later* portions of Jesus' discourse are those words we love as peaceful serenity and we often use as beloved confirmation verses... words like "I lay down my life for the sheep" and "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one will snatch them

out of my hand.” Yes, what *beautiful*, comforting words in those latter portions of this chapter. But, if we’re going to appreciate the depth of comfort in those latter portions, we really ought meditate upon the foundation of the teaching as Jesus establishes it at the beginning of the chapter. Thus, this morning’s text...

First, perhaps we do well to understand this on the heels of chapter 9, which closes by Jesus telling the pharisees that because they think they see, they remain blind. They are imposters, false teachers, who – though well-intended – can mislead the sheep into danger and leave them defenseless to the devil’s devouring anti-Messiah proclamations. Isn’t that exactly what the Pharisees were doing? Saying of Jesus: “This man is a sinner, certainly not the Christ of God!” Yes, imposters, false teachers, hirelings and false shepherds.

And, thus, chapter 10 begins by Jesus appealing to himself as the door, the gatekeeper. This is sort of confusing at first, because the appeal to “the shepherd” is also present. And, in fact, after John’s gospel briefly comments in verse 6 that his hearers did not understand, Jesus again explains and – in a matter of three verses – appeals to himself as *both* the Door and the Shepherd! No need to appeal to the logic of the dual-illustration; Jesus’ purpose is not to show the logic of it, but the authority and exclusivity of Him as the key to the illustration... and, thus, the safety and certainty for all sheep who believe in the Christ this illustration teaches.

Yes, your comfort and safety in Christ is beyond what one image of teaching can convey. Not only is he your shepherd; he's also the door. You are doubly-safe in Him. So, by considering each, and both together, we may rejoice in their overlapping relationship.

First, that Jesus is the door. Perhaps this is not as comforting to the senses because we know of times when we don't like doors. They keep us out of places we want to be and places in which we expect we have a right to be. And, certainly, this preventative feature, this barrier to exclusive access, it *is* (whether we want it to be true or not) it *is* true of Jesus himself ...who reminds even His own disciples in the Upper Room: "No one comes to the Father but by Me." Exclusive access to God, only through Jesus, and we may (rightly) hear that as Law. Try to enter the sheepfold of the Church, the sheepfold of heaven, any other way than through Christ's merit – whether that be through your 'decision,' your penance, your 'status as elect,' your good works or perfect liturgical practice – any other path to the Father will be met by the gatekeeper: No entrance except through the person and merit and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

But, here in our text, the image of the Door is not about preventing access to the ear of the *Father*; it's about preventing access to the ear of the *sheep*. In other words, it's a barrier of *safety for the sheep*, a line of defense that safeguards the sheepfold from all invaders and hirelings. And that door is Christ Himself.

Yes, He himself is your preacher. He himself is your host at the feast of the Sacrament. He himself is, as the epistle says, the Bishop and Overseer of your souls. What safety is yours with Christ, the gatekeeper!... Christ, the Door... that where you “shelter-in-place” with Jesus as your protector, nothing and no one can harm you.

To be sure, the false teachers will try. They will say, “Here is Jesus” and “There is Jesus” and “We taught and ate with Jesus”, but such imposters, such invaders who use the office of undershepherd to advance themselves or other theologies or anything other than Christ, they will be kept out of the sheepfold, that the sheep may graze and feed and rest in safety and peace... indeed, may (as we pray) “lead quiet and peaceable lives.”

Now, if Jesus is that door, and gatekeeper and line of defense for His Church, He is also the Good Shepherd. Why this second image? Perhaps because a door only helps you shelter-in-place, but life is lived by going in and out, all the while going through the door. Christians are not meant to “shelter-in-place” ... we’re meant to live and be stewards of this creation and enjoy God’s blessings therein, even though it be plagued by the Fall. Indeed, even in our baptism, as a comfort for the rest of our earthly days, these words of the psalm are spoken over us: “The Lord preserve your coming in and going out from this day forth and even forevermore.”

And, if the *Lord* is going to preserve that movement, he must go with us, indeed, before us. He must be our Good Shepherd. We need him to be, for without him, we all like sheep go astray, each of us to his own way. Yes, the pasture is there, but without the Good Shepherd, we wander away because we always think the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. Temptation does not overpower us by blunt force trauma; it entices us, it baits us, it attempts to lead us. And, as we realize about ourselves that we are mere sheep, we admit that we *will* be devoured if left to our own devices. Thus, what comfort to hear these words: "I am the Good Shepherd."

Now, *here's* an image that conveys nothing but promise and comfort, safety and security in every situation. Thus, it is an image we ought remember as we grow weary in our current situation, because this too is a situation in which he is still our Good Shepherd.

We can rightly take great comfort in that, but we ought be careful not to comfort *ourselves* in that. By that, I mean that sometimes we can think that the comforting image of the Good Shepherd is a picture we can just put in our pocket almost like a good luck charm and convince ourselves that "As long as I want this direction in life, my Good Shepherd will take me there!" Remember that famous picture of Jesus that circulated during World War II and rightly comforted soldiers in foxholes and on frontlines and perhaps even as they lay dying? How good and beneficial that image was!

And yet, if someone were to put a picture of that in his pocket, then think he can wander into all sorts of ethically questionable and faithless situations, into a life of moral and theological indifference, is that not a gross misuse of the image? Yes, we too easily use the beloved teaching of “the Good Shepherd” as reason to believe we may wander, and he will follow. But a Shepherd *leads*, and the sheep – to keep safe – they follow.

Part of faithful following is considering where the Scriptures say our Good Shepherd leads us. We know those beloved verses of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.” And as calming and pleasant as that image is, it's the next line that properly defines it: “He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” Yes, as those baptized into the name of Christ, the Good Shepherd will always and only lead us in paths of righteousness. We ought never excuse ourselves, our wandering, our indifferent sloth by saying that “green pastures” means anywhere I consider to be green! We color-blind sinners would call decay’s black “green pastures” if it meant we could justify dwelling and dabbling for a time.

But Jesus leads “in paths of righteousness.” And, with that level-head of right doctrine, we are taught to trust His Name no matter where He leads. When sheep trust their shepherd, they feel safe no matter where they follow Him. They say, “If he knows it best that we traverse the valley of shadow of death, then we will fear no

evil, for He is with us.” Yes, even in the valley of the shadow of death, isn’t he still leading? – “Thou art with me”, with me, not as though leading from behind, allowing us to sniff around and dabble in whatever temptation we desire, but leading us *through* and *out of* whatever situation must be navigated in the paths’ earthly sojourn.

So, if we consider that He is always leading – Faithful Shepherd that He is – if He is always leading us in good times and in bad times, then we ought also learn and cherish *how* He leads us, lest we convince ourselves that we could improve upon his skills and instruments of leading and caring for us.

As we’ve already hinted at, it’s tempting to say, “Because he’s the Good Shepherd, he’ll lead the way I want him to.” But “Good” doesn’t mean “good for my psyche,” but “good for my eternal inheritance.” It doesn’t mean “He’ll do anything to please me,” it means “He is noble, trustworthy, true.” And, in situations in which we begin to doubt and waver, we ought trust not only *that* He leads and *where* He leads, but *How* he leads.

The psalm hints at this: “Thy rod and thy staff – they comfort me.” Does the Scriptural image of a *rod* really comfort you? Only if you see that the Law is good and you, the sinner, are not. Only if you see that God’s will is better than your will and that, sometimes, what is good for you is to be curbed and disciplined and taught anew. Yes, not only the teaching of the Gospel, but also the teaching of the Law is good for you. Thus, “They rod and Thy staff” – the Law keeps the

attention-deficit sheep from wandering, the Gospel assures and comforts and defends the precious lambs.

And not only does the Good Shepherd make use of *the Holy Word* in caring for us, but “Thou preparest a table before me” – where? – even “in the presence of mine enemies.” Indeed, life doesn’t have to be perfectly safe and quiet before Jesus spreads His banquet before us. Life doesn’t have to be free of danger and enemies before He is willing to gather and feed us. Rather, His Holy Supper is even for those times when it seems the dangers and enemies are all around us... even for those times when we might be uncomfortable because we know how imminent is the threat. In those times, the sheep might even be restless, not wanting to there and then have the Good Shepherd stop and spread His table. We might ask him, “Really, here, Lord, where the grass is not green and the thistles are all around? Do we really have to stope here? Don’t You know you’re preparing the table in the presence of mine enemies?”

Friends, when in life are we *not* in the presence of our enemies? Forgetting the *how* of the Christ’s shepherdly care tempts us to think that we always live in green pastures... that life following the Shepherd is always supposed to be promised green pastures and – when suddenly it isn’t, we ought expect him to remove us from the valley of the shadow of death before allowing my cup to overflow with His goodness. We say, “What good is it if my cup overflows if I



can't enjoy it because I'm always looking over my shoulder?" And he responds, "Why are you looking over your shoulder? Have you forgotten that your Shepherd is Good and Noble and Trustworthy and True?, so that wherever and whenever I set you down in life and spread my table before you – even in the presence of your enemies – you will be fed, cared for, defended, sustained."

How comforting is that! Jesus does not say, "I will only care for you when you feel as though there are no enemies around." Again, he doesn't say, "Gee, my rod and staff and banqueting table are only useful if we've found peaceful serenity. If you are in troubled times, I guess we'll have to pick up and move and wait to spread the banqueting table until you can approve the place I've found for you!" Rather, he says, "I will feed you wherever and whenever I know is good because – as your Good Shepherd – I will ensure that surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life, that you may dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

In these distressing days, what comfort that our Good Shepherd leads. *Where* he leads, we may sometimes begin to question ...*if* we begin to doubt his goodness. Does our shaken faith not doubt our Good Shepherd's alertness in these times: "Where is God in all of this? Why would he allow us to endure this? Why not walk us around it rather than through it?"

Again, *how* he leads, we may ask if we can do without... *if* we begin to fear his wisdom: "Really, Lord, what good is Word and

Sacrament against viruses and loss of jobs and crumbling economies and misguided governments?”

Friends, may we sheep cherish being sheep; may we cherish that our shepherd is the Good, Noble, Trustworthy and True Shepherd. Having laid down his life for his sheep and having taken it up again, he now lives to keep His sheepfold and prevent anyone or anything from snatching the precious sheep of the Father out of His hand. And, in that shepherdly watch of his sheepfold, He makes bold and certain promises... promises grounded on the foundational truth that he is both Door to shelter us in the day of trouble and Shepherd to lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. No matter what befalls you, the Good Shepherd defends you. When the wolf – through imposters and false teaching – seeks to entice you away, the Good Shepherd corrals and safeguards you. If even temporal death strikes you, He will raise you. – you will not perish, you will not die into the age... you will have life, and have it abundantly.

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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