

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter: Acts 2:42-27; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10; Psalm 23**

**Would a Shepherd be considered good if the Shepherd did not keep an eye on and lead the sheep? You know, like what if the Shepherd were on his iPhone, texting and scrolling through Facebook all the time, never looking up while lions tackle and devour the sheep? Or what if the Shepherd failed to lead the sheep on safe pathways by instead permitting them to fall off cliffs and into pits, refusing to guide them to water to drink? Well, the sheep would clearly perish, and the Shepherd would not be good. But our Lord, Jesus, is our good Shepherd because he keeps an eye on us and leads us just as we read in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm today. Jesus leads us in and out to find pasture, leading us by still waters, guiding us along right pathways for his Name's sake. Not just any pathway, the right pathways, says David in this psalm today. Because there are wrong pathways. The Shepherd uses his staff to keep us on right pathways for his Name's sake. And the staff is uniquely a Shepherd's tool. It is long and has the crook on the end. The staff is not suited for any other animal, not the ox nor the horse nor the pig – it is designed for leading sheep. It is long so that it can guide several sheep at once and has the crook to pull sheep back into the right pathways or lift them out of a pit. The staff is designed to guide. The staff is important for the Shepherd to lead sheep in the direction that they should go by keeping them on right pathways as he oversees their souls. The Lord revives our souls – we are told today in the Psalm. And so, the Lord as our Shepherd is both overseer and guide for our souls.**

**Peter also likens the Lord as our Shepherd to an Overseer of our souls today. Today's translation from 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter says: "For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls." But the better translation is not guardian of your souls, but overseer of your souls. The word in the original Greek is episkopos which literally means keeping an eye on with epi meaning "on" and skopos meaning "look intently." Peter likens our Shepherd to the one who "looks intently on" or "oversees" our souls. Episkopos means overseer. This is where the word Episcopal comes from. We are structured under overseers or Bishops. Because the original Apostles were considered Bishops or overseers of souls, given they had been entrusted with the teachings of Christ. They taught what Christ had taught them in order to keep believers on right pathways for his Name's sake. Like a Shepherd's staff.**

The Gospel as revealed to us by Christ Jesus through the Apostles acts upon us like a Shepherd's staff, keeping us in right pathways. We take on the Shepherd's name at baptism and the Shepherd guides us in right pathways for his Name's sake. In order to guide and grow us up into the Name we have been given so that we rightly represent the Name of Jesus to the world.

And to achieve these purposes of rightly growing up into the name of Jesus and rightly representing the name of Jesus to the world, when our Good Shepherd left the world physically, he did two things in particular for us. He said he would not leave us comfortless and so he sent the Holy Spirit to indwell and guides us. Whoever believes and receives Jesus as Messiah, the promised One of God, receives also the indwelling of Holy Spirit to guide us. But also, Jesus set up overseers in his absence. When Jesus, the Overseer of our souls, physically ascended into heaven, he left overseers in his stead. He commissioned the twelve apostles and the Apostle Paul, who was extended the right hand of fellowship from James, Peter, and John because they recognized Paul's teachings to be from Christ (Gal 2:9). And we read about the importance of these teachings of these Apostles in Acts today. In the book of Acts today, Luke explains that those who had been baptized "devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching." Why? Why not be baptized and then just run off and go about your life, why also devote oneself to the Apostles teachings? Well, because without the teachings, a sheep does not grow up or stay on right pathways. And so, the teachings of the Apostles were crucial because the Apostles had walked with Jesus and had been entrusted to continue overseeing the sheep so that they didn't fall into pits and get eaten by lions in the spiritual realm. And so, the very first thing we are told today, is that in order for the Apostles to properly guide the sheep, the newly baptized devoted themselves to the Apostles teachings. This is why we have the tradition where even after baptism, young people will go on to study scripture to later be confirmed as an attestation that they have devoted themselves to the Apostles teachings and that they understand the teachings of Christ. Or adults will study before being baptized. As it is now, so it was then. The most important factor in being an overseer of souls, is to teach what Jesus teaches and not deviate from the teachings of Jesus in any manner. Because that is how sheep get off track. Going outside of the teachings of Christ.

And where do we find the teachings of Christ as handed to us through the original Apostles? Well, the New Testament of course. The New Testament was vetted by those who were either Apostles or taught by Apostles or taught directly by Christ. Matthew was Levi the Tax collector and one of the original Apostles. John was one of the three innermost Apostles, who was privy to the Transfiguration and invited to pray in Gethsemane and known as the disciple whom Jesus loved. Mark traveled with Paul and is thought to have been Peter's scribe, and Peter was of course the one to profess the rock upon which Christ's church would be built: the confession that Jesus is the Messiah. And Jude and James, were half-brothers of Jesus, and so of course they had heard directly from Jesus himself. And Luke traveled and learned from Paul and as we discussed last week, interviewed eyewitnesses in order to present a defense of the Christian faith to authority. And Paul became an Apostle after having been caught up into the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven having truth revealed directly to him by Jesus Christ himself. Paul tells us of this in Galatians 1:11 and 10 saying: "For I certify to you, brothers, that the gospel I preached was not devised by man. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ." Paul was taught by Jesus Christ through direct revelation.

And so, the entire New Testament is the teaching of the Apostles as they were taught directly from Jesus Christ. Which gives us confidence, like the early Christians, to devote ourselves to the teaching of the original apostles by studying the New Testament. The New Testament relays the words of the Good Shepherd whose words act upon us like a Shepherd's staff. When we are getting off base or going down bunny trails or presented with false doctrines, we return to the teachings of the Apostles, and it works like a Shepherd's staff. Drawing us back to Jesus, keeping us on track, pulling us out of pits so that we don't get devoured by the father of lies, Satan, who prowls around like a lion deceiving the sheep. And so, if someone teaches or preaches to you anything that contradicts the teachings of the Apostles, scripture has some things to say about that. The Apostle Paul tells us in Galatians: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be under a curse! As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be under a curse!" (Gal 1:8-9). Twice in one section of scripture, Paul calls a curse upon anyone who would preach something other than the Gospel as revealed by Jesus Christ.

And so, when the early church fathers and priests and ecclesiastical authorities were deciding what should go in or not go into the Canon of Holy Scripture through a series of synods and assemblies of church officials, not only did they have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to guide them, they knew a double curse would be upon them if they deviated in any manner from what Christ taught. And so, I wager they probably used the rule of thumb: when in doubt throw it out, kind of thing... because who wants to be double cursed? And there are other warnings against false teachings in scripture, one of which is where the Apostle John says to us in 2nd John Chapter 1 verses 7 through 11 the following and I quote: "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, refusing to confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be fully rewarded. Anyone who runs ahead without remaining in the teaching of Christ does not have God. Whoever remains in His teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you but does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your home or even greet him. Whoever greets such a person shares in his evil deeds." End of quote. And so that seems pretty clear to me and pretty narrow and pretty important. That there are many deceivers who have gone out into the world refusing to confess that Jesus, the Messiah, came to us in the flesh. Or in other words they deny that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Anyone who teaches Jesus is not God who has come to us in the flesh, is a deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, says John, so that you do not lose your reward and simultaneously lose what we, the Apostles, have worked for in teaching you the Truth, says John. Watch out! Anyone who runs ahead without remaining in the teaching of Christ does not have God. Which is a narrow statement. Yet Jesus himself affirms this to us saying, "The *words* I have spoken to you are Spirit and are life," (John 6:63) and "No one comes to the Father except *through* me," (John 14:6). And John continues in this excerpt from his letter saying: Whoever remains in Christ's teachings has both the Father and the Son. And then John warns again *to not even receive* a person who is teaching something other than what Christ has taught because in so doing you will share in their evil deeds. Because a little leaven works through the whole lump. We must remain devoted to the Apostles teachings for they are the words Jesus entrusted them to record for us in the New Testament, the very words of Christ, the words of the New Covenant, shedding light on everything set forth in the original covenant, the Old Testament, all of

which as we discussed last week, point to Jesus as the Messiah in over 300 prophecies.

There is no other Truth, no other Messiah, no other Good Shepherd. Which means the path is narrow as Jesus explains to us today, that not only is he *the* Shepherd, but he is also *the* Gate. Not *a* gate, not *one of many* gates, not a gate that is *just like any other gate* through which you can be saved and go in and go out and find pasture, but *the Gate* for the sheep. Which means, not all religions are equal. If any religion says Jesus be only a prophet...survey says: "Bwamp!" (For those of you who remember the T.V. show Family Feud with the buzzer, that was for you...). "Bwamp!" They are incorrect. They are not on the right pathway. Now, can God use all pathways to then reveal Jesus to those who are seeking? Yes. We are assured of this in scripture for God says to us in Jeremiah 29:13: "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for me with all your heart." I do not believe for one second that God leaves someone seeking to know Him without guidance. Jesus assured us that when he was lifted up from the earth, he would draw all people to himself, (John 12:32). This is why the Great Commission is to spread the Gospel to all nations. And Jesus says also, "For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened," that's Matthew chapter 7 verse 8. At which point the only hinderance to salvation would be that once you are shown Jesus, you reject him. Jesus tells us this in John 3:36 saying: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever rejects the Son will not see life. Instead, the wrath of God remains on him." That is a very important scripture, a direct teaching from Jesus Christ, and I don't think we teach that particular tidbit often enough. "Whoever rejects the Son will not see life." We need to know this given we play a role in delivering the teachings of Christ to those who are seeking. And Christians get accused of being exclusionary for insisting that Christ be *the* Way. But scripture tells us in 1 Timothy 2:4 that, "God wants *everyone* to be saved and to know the whole truth." And so that doesn't sound exclusionary to me. The Truth is available to all, but there is only one Truth. And so, if we as Christians are labeled exclusionary for trying to teach Truth, I say to you it is better than being called inclusionary for teaching falsehood. 2 + 2 will never equal 5, and you're not going to help anybody pass a final exam by teaching them falsehood. What good is it to extend something other than the Truth to those who are perishing? Only Living Water can save someone dying of thirst, and so don't let people crawl across the desert in the wrong direction when you know where the Living Water is. Don't tell them that any direction that they crawl will be just fine, because it won't. We

have becomes so affirming we deceive others if we tell them they are just perfect the way they are without the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. All roads may lead to Rome, but all gateways do not get you to God. Paul says a double curse be upon anyone who teaches a deception such as that! And so whatever pathway a seeking person may be on, the Good Shepherd in reaching for them with His staff is going to present to them the teachings of the original Apostles so that they may know the truth about Jesus Christ. Jesus says point blank to us today, "Very truly, I tell you, I am *the gate* for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits...*I am the gate*. Whoever enters *by me* will be saved." And so that is pretty clear. The Lord is our Shepherd, and we shall not want for anything, including dwelling in the house of the Lord forever, but we have to enter through *the Gate* to be saved. And that Gate is none other than Jesus Christ.

And so, I leave you with this exhortation in the Gospel of Matthew from Jesus Christ himself. Jesus says to us both as an encouragement and a warning: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it," (Matt 7:13-14). The narrow Gate is Jesus Christ our Good Shepherd who has entrusted us to spread the teachings handed to us through the Apostles in order to help guide other lost sheep in finding *the Gate*. Amen.