

 **The Bethel Pulpit**

 **Pastor John Swanson**

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 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: **John 10:22-30**

May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Last week John Bauer, Bethel's Interim Director of Administration, preached from the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John. The situation that unfolded before us last week was Jesus appearing to seven of the disciples after his resurrection. These seven disciples are out fishing on a boat and Jesus appears on the beach and he tells them to throw the net on the other side and after having had no luck all night they haul in 153 fish.

In his sermon, John Bauer focused in on the conversation that Jesus had with Peter once the disciples got on shore. After eating bread and fish, Jesus has this rather peculiar interaction with Peter where he asks him three times if he loves him and after Peter responds each time yes Jesus responds “Feed my lambs”, “Tend my sheep” and “Feed my sheep” and then Jesus concludes with, “Follow me.”

So, we come to today – the 4th Sunday in the season of Easter, which is known as “Good Shepherd” Sunday – and we have moved back a bit in John’s Gospel, back to the 10th chapter. And again, we hear this reference to sheep - *My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.*

The suggested Psalm for today – for Good Shepherd Sunday – is Psalm 23 – *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. 2He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;* *\***3he restores my soul.**\** *He leads me in right paths* *\***for his name’s sake. 4Even though I walk through the darkest valley,* *\***I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me. 5You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6Surely**\** *goodness and mercy**\** *shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

It is the perfect Psalm to be connected to Good Shepherd Sunday – this Psalm that speaks of the Lord as our Shepherd watching over us, loving us, and giving us strength in times of difficulty.

I was listening to a Podcast about the assigned readings for this weekend – yes, there actually is such a thing and there are actually people that listen to such podcasts. It comes from a website we Lutheran pastor’s love – it is called “Working Preacher.”

One of the three theologians speaking on the podcast was Rolf Jacobson. He shared that he was asked to be part of a grant a few years back where 1,500 people were asked questions about when they read the Bible. He said that in response to the question, “What Bible passage speaks to you in times of suffering?” Psalm 23 was picked specifically by 16% of the people and 10% of people picked “Psalms” in general, which he assumed meant Psalm 23 to at least some of the people.

He went on to say that the responses informed them that people tend to feel that Bible most often comes alive for them in times of crisis.

As an example, he mentioned one of the 1,500 people they interviewed as part of the survey – a man whose son had died some years before. The man shared that in the midst of that terrible grief – as he tried to somehow, and in some way, wrap his head around this horrible loss – he began to read the Bible every day. And he was still doing so up to the point of the interview. The man said that for a long time before he began doing that, the first thought that would come to his mind when he woke up was, “My son’s dead.” He said that at some point, eventually after years mind you, his first thought when he wakes up has changed to, “I’m alive.”

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,* *\***I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.*

Such words – such holy words – can somehow work in us and come alive in us, filling us with comfort and hope, because they remind us that God is present with us – present like a Good Shepherd tending to his flock.

I guess I might describe what this father experienced was something of a miracle. After all, in many ways this poor man was dead, and somehow and in some amazing and powerful and unique ways, he became alive again. That doesn’t just happen – that, in some way, was a God moment and thanks be to God for that one and for the many other ones that take place in our world.

Remember in our Gospel for today Jesus says, *My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me?*

This grieving Dad somehow heard Jesus’ voice in the midst of the overwhelming sounds of grief, anger, sadness, depression, and I am sure much more. The sounds that he had to overcome to hear Jesus’ quiet and calm voice are most likely very different than the sounds that you and I may have to overcome, but those sounds that pull us away from Jesus are out there for all of us.

My Dad was a pastor for over 40 years and the thing that we now call “Children’s Moments” he used to call “Brown Bag Sermons.”

One of his “Brown Bag Sermons” dealt with hearing Jesus voice in the midst of a busy world. He asked a child to stand in the front of the church saying, “Jesus loves you.” He asked another child to go to the back of the church and listen. He made sure the one speaking could be heard by the one listening – then he assigned the congregation “parts.” One section of the congregation represented sports fans – they could cheer for any team they wanted to. Another section represented politicians – they cheered for the politicians of the day. Another section represented stores, so they were yelling out buy this or buy that. And Dad had a final section of the congregation be money people and they were shouting out investment strategies or something like that.

Anyway, the girl in front continued to say – at the same volume – “Jesus loves you” as the congregation began to speak. Before long, the boy in the back could not hear the message, even though the volume of the message did not change at all.

The voice that we are called to follow is one of many voices that we hear throughout our days – some of those voices are very legitimate voices and some are not. But the voice of the Good Shepherd is unique amongst them all.

It is the voice that offers welcome rather than shame; it is the voice that speaks of abundance rather than scarcity; it is the voice of peace rather than division, generosity rather than greed; justice rather than corruption, hope rather than fear; the voice of the Good Shepherd is the voice of liberation rather than oppression.

Two Sundays in a row we have heard Jesus say, follow me. What does that mean for us – what does it mean to follow this Good Shepherd? This one whose voice calls us and leads us – what does life look like as people who follow Jesus?

At least part of the answer is found earlier in the 10th chapter of John, where Jesus says, *I came that they have life, and have it abundantly.*

The abundant life that Jesus speaks of is not necessarily about abundance in years, or wealth, or status, or accomplishments. It is life that is abundant in the love of God; a love that is made known to us in the person of Jesus Christ, and a love that overflows to others.

In the midst of all the other voices out there pulling us this way and that – voices that evoke fear, voices that make demands, give advice, or cause shame – (in the midst of all those other voices) the voice of the Good Shepherd comes to us as a voice of promise; it is a voice that calls us by name and claims us as God’s own. That is a voice worth hearing! Amen.