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Easter 4 – John 10:1-10 – Follow the Good Shepherd  
through the Gate to Heaven

5/3/20 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

For hundreds of years, the people of Israel were ransacked, pillaged, and taken advantage of. They were run down, robbed, and destroyed both physically and spiritually, and the worst part of it all was that it wasn't even by the Egyptians or Assyrians or Babylonians. Sure, they played a part in it. But the worst damage ever done to Israel came from its own leaders. The people who were supposed to be taking care of it and watching out for it and helping it grow and thrive and flourish were instead the ones who were taking it apart piece by piece for their own personal gain and to feed their own personal egos.

For hundreds of years the LORD called those leaders to repentance through prophet after prophet, but the good kings like David and Hezekiah and Josiah were just too few and far between to fix this problem. So finally, even after the Israelites had gone away from God and gone into captivity in Babylon, the LORD still promised his people through his prophet Ezekiel, *“I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered... I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.”*

No matter how many disappointing leaders, no matter how many disgraceful shepherds had gone before, the LORD promised his people that the day would come when God's Good Shepherd would make his people lie down in green pastures, would lead them beside quiet waters, would restore their souls and guide them in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. For hundreds if not thousands of years the flock of God's people cried out to the LORD for the shepherd who would tend them, lead them, and care for them as he had always promised, and on this day in Jerusalem, all their hopes were realized in our Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus came to make everything right for his people, to be the Good Shepherd they really needed and so longed for, and to be the one that we can love, trust, and follow throughout this life and ultimately through the gate to heaven.

So on this day in Jerusalem, Jesus had already made a pretty big splash. It was the Sabbath day, and Jesus had just given sight to a man who was blind from birth. Well, the Pharisees didn't approve, because in their minds doing miracles of healing was work, and work was reserved for the other six days of the week. So when they questioned this man about how it happened and who did it, he told them that the man who did it must be a great prophet from God who should be believed in and followed for all that power and authority and glory he demonstrated that day. Well again, the Pharisees didn't like that very much because this “prophet” obviously didn't follow along with all of *their* rules and didn't bow to their own perceived authority, so they threw the man born blind out of the synagogue for daring to lecture them.

As far as the Jews were concerned, that meant that his life was over, his place as a child of God was forfeit, was lost, he was headed to hell and there was nothing he could do about it, and the Pharisees couldn't have cared less. Imagine the kind of burden that guy would have carried around with him the rest of his life if Jesus hadn't gotten to him first to tell him what he tells all of us in our Gospel lesson for today. But that was the kind of power the Pharisees and all the rest of the Jewish religious leaders had over the people of Israel. They didn't really care about them and their spiritual lives. All they wanted to do was put them under their thumbs so that they could feel good about themselves. The Jewish religious leaders loved their high and mighty positions of leadership much more than they loved the souls of their people, and rather than serving and building up the Israelites like the Lord wanted them to, they took from them, hurt them, and led them down all sorts of paths that caused harm to their bodies and especially to their souls. They weren't the faithful and upright shepherds that the Lord wanted them to be – they were the thieves and robbers that Jesus talked about who only came to steal and kill and destroy.

And just because there aren't Pharisees anymore and there aren't too many Jewish religious leaders here in Beaver Dam doesn't mean the devil still isn't working those same kinds of influences all around us. Our society tells us that the Bible doesn't mean a whole lot anymore, we can't even be sure where it came from or how reliable it is, and the latest celebrity opinions and gossip are probably more worth your time. In a split second you can get vilified and ostracized and attacked for holding “old-fashioned” views on marriage and sexuality. There's hardly anything more unpopular and intolerant right now in this country and throughout

the world than saying that Jesus is the only Savior of humanity and Christianity is the only way to heaven. And even in the church itself, there are modern-day Pharisees teaching that the most important thing is how much money you give (as if you can just pay off God like he's some bill collector!), or that our whole goal and purpose should be worldly prosperity (as if this sin-broken world is the best we can hope for!), or that in one way or another we have to finish what Jesus started by our own works and man-made rules, because salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (as God's Word teaches and promises) can't possibly be that easy. And even in your own hearts and minds, the devil is constantly beating you and burdening you over all the times you've caved to the world and failed in your faithfulness to your Savior.

But people of God, hear the Word of your Good Shepherd: *"The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice."* You know, the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep was really kind of a striking one. Sheep had a lot to worry about in their lives – dangerous landscapes, wild animals, bad weather, bandits – but the shepherd was the answer to all of them. The shepherd called them to follow him along safe paths, he carried a staff and sometimes other weapons to fend off wild animals and bandits, and he kept them under shelter when a storm was on its way. He meant everything for the sheep, he loved them selflessly, and his entire purpose was to keep them safe, even from themselves and their own wandering tendencies. He even knew each one of them by name and his whole existence revolved around caring for their every need.

And my friends, that's exactly what Jesus is for us. He calls us to himself – calls us to follow him in his Word, he made his home in our hearts through his Word, and he guides our lives every day with that same Word. The voice of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is the Word of God that we hear every time we open up the Scriptures – the Word of God that calls us to follow him through the gate to heaven. There are so many other voices vying for our attention in this world, but none of them are as kind, none are as caring, none are as trustworthy as our Lord's, so let's follow him. He keeps us away from the dangers of sin, he protects us from the devil and all his temptations, and he's our shelter from all the hurts and hardships that storm

down on us throughout our lives. There is no voice that's more vital for us and our spiritual lives, and so there's nowhere more important for us to be (in person or in spirit) than gathered around his Word and Sacraments to feed our faith, to come to know and love our Savior's voice that much more clearly, and to listen to his call and humbly go wherever he leads, fully confident that he has our best interests in mind and he wants us to live and prosper spiritually as his children.

And just like those sheep following their shepherd don't have a care in the world, so also we who follow our Good Shepherd have his promise of grace and every blessing in all aspects of our lives. *"I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."*

You who have faith in Jesus, your Good Shepherd, have the promise that salvation is yours, that the doors to heaven are open to you, and that you will walk through them hand-in-hand with your Savior to be with him there forever. What freedom that brings, and what relief from all the problems in your lives! Your relationship with Jesus brings you protection and security, because no matter what happens here, nothing can touch your souls, nothing can rip you out of his hands, and nothing can keep you from your heavenly home. Your relationship with Jesus leads you to a life free from fear and worry, because you know that your Savior is watching over you every day, he's listening to your prayers and blessing you, and he's working everything around you for your spiritual and eternal good. And your relationship with Jesus gives you total peace of mind because you know you have a Good Shepherd who cares about you more than you will ever know, who has defeated and destroyed everything that threatens you and burdens you, and who has cleared the way to finally deliver you to your heavenly home.

So that means that even right now you have life in its truest sense – with freedom, meaning, purpose, and hope – and the day is coming when you will have life to the full with all its joy and perfection when you follow your Good Shepherd through the gate to heaven for eternity. So God's chosen flock, have no fear, have no doubt, have no worry; rather, listen to the voice of your Savior, follow where he leads to the pastures of paradise, and live. Amen.