

Fourth Sunday after Easter
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
17 April 2016

John 10: 22-30

Welcome to the Feast of the Good Shepherd. The Collect, Psalm, Revelation and John's readings today are about sheep and shepherds. In the Collect we said that God's son, Jesus, is the good shepherd of God's people and we asked that when we hear his voice we may recognize him and follow him where he leads. Then in Psalm 23 we remembered how before Jesus was the Good Shepherd, God himself had been seen in Jewish Scripture to be a Good Shepherd. Psalm 23 tells us that the Lord (God) is the shepherd, but, most importantly "MY" shepherd. It is for this reason that the good Jew shall never want for anything. God provides rest in green pastures and still waters. He revives the soul of those who are weary and hungry. He guides his people along the right paths. For this reason, his people fear no evil. God's rod and staff provides them safety and comfort. He will guide them home, where he himself provides a banquet for them in the presence of their enemies. And once they are home, goodness and mercy will follow them all their days, as they dwell in the house of the Lord.

In Revelation 7:9-17 John sees the fulfillment of Psalm 23. Thousands gather before God and the Lamb with branches in their hands. The multitude, the angels and the elders and everyone else worship God. John is allowed to witness this great scene of praise. One of the elders asks him if he knows who the crowds are. John, does not know, so the elder provides the answer. The crowds, dressed in white, for they had been washed in the blood of the Lamb, are the ones who just came out of the great ordeal. They had died and now they are before the Lamb. Now in perfect harmony, they worship God as Psalm 23 announced. Here in Paradise the people of God will hunger no more and thirst no more. The Shepherd has led them home and has provided for them green pastures and calm streams of water. They are no longer afflicted by the fluctuations of the weather, and in fulfillment of Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34, "The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." In fact, "goodness and mercy will follow them, as they dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

In Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34 (Not given to us today), Isaiah 25 (and others) there is a promise that God will be the Shepherd of Israel and that he himself will lead them home where a great banquet of celebration will take place for people of all nations, tribes, and tongues. In Revelation, John is given a glimpse of the fulfillment of these promises, but

John knows that the promises of old have been fulfilled through God's Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is the message that Jesus himself gives the "Jews" today in John 10. Let me set the stage. The Jews had tried to stone Jesus once before, but Jesus escaped. Now Jesus is back to celebrate the Feast of Dedication. This feast, known today as Hanukkah, commemorated the re-dedication of the Second Temple after the three years of defilement from 167-164 B.C. Remember how the Seleucid Emperor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes had desecrated the Temple and set an altar for the sacrifices to Zeus in the year 167. He had prohibited the Jews from practicing their faith. After the Maccabean revolt was successful in defeating the Seleucids, the Temple was re-consecrated in an 8-day festival. Hanukkah celebrates this rededication.

John tells us that Jesus was walking to the Temple. This scene then does not happen in the Temple, but in the enclosed 45-foot walkway that connects the Court of the Gentiles to the Temple. So, right outside the Temple, the Jews approach Jesus. They are tired of Jesus speaking in riddles and symbolic language. They want him to tell them plainly if he is the Messiah or not. They say, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus then makes the statement that he has told them, but they have not believed him. They fail to understand not because he is speaking in signs, but because they have no faith. Then Jesus makes an incredible claim: The reason they don't understand him is because they are not his sheep. By saying this, Jesus is plainly telling them that he is the fulfillment of Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34. He is the Good Shepherd and those who accept him know his voice and follow him. And then he says, that those who follow him will have eternal life. He is the connection between the announcements of the Old Testament and the fulfillment of Revelation.

The Jews can not understand because they don't belong to those the Father has given Jesus. Ironically, since the Father and the Son are one, the Jews don't belong to God either. Their lack of faith in Jesus the Messiah had placed them outside of God's plan of salvation for humanity. This is an incredible claim. In fact, verse 31 tells us that while they were still talking, the Jews picked up stones and were ready to stone Jesus for blasphemy. Jesus continues to calmly talk to them about their lack of faith. Then in verse 36 he says, "Can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son'?" In other words, Jesus is the one sanctified by God. This word sanctified also means "set-apart" or "consecrated". On the very day as the Temple is celebrated as "set-apart" for the service of God, Jesus tells the Jews that he is truly the "one set-apart" by God. He is the New Temple. From this day forward, people will worship God through and in Jesus and not in the Temple. Jesus has replaced the Law and has replaced the Temple.

Now, my friends, it is important to remember that by the time John was written, the Christians had been expelled from many synagogues and the Temple had already been destroyed by the Romans (A. D. 70). Perhaps there are Jewish converts who still long for the days of the Temple and who still believe that as good Jews they should worship God at the synagogue. John reminds them that in Christ we have a new Temple and a new Covenant in his Blood. Christ's divinity is affirmed strongly in this passage through names such as "Son of God" and "Good Shepherd". These titles point directly to Jesus fulfilling Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34. God has in fact become the nations' Shepherd through his Son, Jesus. There is no longer any need for Temple worship, for sacrifices, and for Jewish festivals. Jesus is the New Temple dedicated (set-apart) by God himself. It is only through him that salvation is possible.

Verse 40 tells us that even though the Jews wanted to stone Jesus, he got away from them and went back across the Jordan to the place where John the Baptist had ministered. They were unable to arrest him or stone him. We are not told how Jesus escaped, but we know that this is his last public teaching in Jerusalem until the triumphal entry we celebrate every Palm Sunday. Perhaps the simplest answer is that his time had not come yet and they were powerless to stop his ministry at this point in history. In either case, the Gospel makes it clear that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Shepherd prophecies of the Old Testament. He is God, he is Messiah, and he is Good Shepherd.

We must then return to our petition at the collect. We must ask God to help us recognize the Good Shepherd's voice among us, so that we may follow him where he leads. But this is a curious petition for us individualistic, independent, free-thinkers in America. The collect does not say, give us the ability to negotiate with the Good Shepherd a wise course of action for our lives. Give us the ability to determine our own itinerary. Help us plan our own journey, so we can make all the stops we want to make and enjoy the sites in whatever way we deem useful. It says let us recognize his voice that we may follow where he leads. My friends this is a dangerous petition because sometimes the shepherd leads to places we don't want to go. Sometimes he leads to the place of forgiveness of others who have offended us. Sometimes he leads to the place of dependence on him and independence from our obsessive need to control everything. Sometimes he leads to the place of sacrifice. Sacrifice of our passions, sacrifice of our jealousy, sacrifice of our hatred and our arrogance. Sometimes the Shepherd will lead us to the place of death. So, when we ask this prayer, let us be aware of the consequences.

May he lead us to the place of salvation and joy. Amen!