

SERMON- Easter 4 (A)
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Acts 2:42-47

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
April 30, 2023

Psalm 23

OPENING:

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday, a day in which we acknowledge Jesus Christ as our loving and faithful shepherd. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus has always been there for us, guiding us through the darkest valleys and leading us towards a life of abundance and fulfillment.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear the repetition of the phrase "I am the good shepherd," reminding us that Jesus is more than just our savior or leader, but rather, He is our protector, comforter, and provider.

As a shepherd, Jesus knows each one of us intimately, and He calls us by name. He knows our joys, our sorrows, our fears, and our secret desires. With His gentle and wise guidance, He leads us towards greener pastures, not just for our physical needs, but more importantly, for our spiritual nourishment.

In the world today, we are constantly bombarded with distractions and temptations that lead us astray from our true calling as disciples of Christ. We must remember to always listen to the voice of our Good Shepherd, who reminds us of our purpose and the mission that we have been given.

Let us take comfort in the words of Psalm 23, which reminds us of the love and care that our Good Shepherd offers.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

Brothers and sisters, as we celebrate this special day, let us renew our commitment to follow our Good Shepherd wholeheartedly. May we always trust in His loving guidance, knowing that He will always lead us towards eternal life and joy.¹

¹ [ChatGPT Online - AI Chat GPT](https://youtu.be/s_Dm2ZR5OPQ?t=2252) Created on April 25, 2023; Sermon from Oran Warder: https://youtu.be/s_Dm2ZR5OPQ?t=2252

VOICE

A clergy mentor of mine preached once that he felt confident that his/our profession would be the last one replaced by robots.

He said he indeed felt confident until recently when reports of remarkably proficient Artificial Intelligence appeared, specifically the ability to model human language and voice.

(Do you know where this is headed?)

The little homily that I just preached was entirely generated by ChatGPT, an online software, and in a matter of seconds. I simply asked: “Could you please write an Episcopal sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday?” and it spit that out.

My mentor had the guts to do this exercise on Easter Sunday and he had to admit, like I do today, that the sermon produced was grammatically correct/ theologically sound, pastorally relevant and the rest.

Somewhat flummoxed by this, my mentor said that he took it one step further and asked the software “what was missing from the sermon (that it had just produced)?” Eerily, the computer responded with this: “What was missing was empathy. Sermons are not just about conveying info or ideas but they need to provide a connection, requiring a level of authenticity and sincerity that an AI Sermon would not be able to give that.”

Jesus says: *The Sheep hear his voice and the Good Shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... the sheep follow him because they know his voice.*

To be clear, I am not Jesus, but when I speak and preach and write, I hope to be honest, to be sincere and authentic. It felt icky to start my sermon in the way that I did because I want to be trusted and for you to know my voice.

While we are on the subject, many of you have received communications and emails from people purporting to be me and asking for money or gift cards or a few minutes of your time. I have also been on the receiving ends of those scams where “thieves and bandits” try to enter into the trust built up between the people of God in order to “steal and destroy.”

You should be offended and cheated by such attempts.

While we are on that subject, think, though, about church stewardship, and how it is one of the rare areas of life where people get asked for money face-to-face. Other organizations (United Way, Symphony, your university of choice etc.) will ask for money via mail and online and have fancy brochures, but the church does it face-to-face. We will look you in the eye and ask for your time, talent and treasure in a way that's somewhat countercultural.

SHIFT

But this is not a sermon about stewardship, nor is it about the dangers of technology, *per se*, although that might be a good one, instead I want to talk about the voices we hear in our lives, how we judge them, and how we are able to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd through it all.

The big terms here are “calling” and “vocation” and “election” that the Church has historically used. But what I am thinking about something different, closer, more intimate, thinking ... what does God's voice sound like to you and me.²

I believe the nature of that voice can be heard in some of God's first words in the Bible when he asks Adam and Eve:

“Where are you?” God asks in Genesis.

It can be heard in Jesus' first words in John's Gospel, Jesus asks the disciples: “Where are you staying?”³

It could sound loving, it could sound tough. But it's unmistakably present and real. It might sound like a love song, some days it might sound like a curse. But be patient with it, stick with it, that's where the shepherd's voice is found.⁴

There's the great scene in the classic French novel *Le Petit Prince* where the Little Prince is stranded on a deserted island, and he encounters a fox who asks that the prince tame him.

“The fox explains to the little prince that the process of taming is what forms a friendship and makes each one unique to the other. The parties wait for each other, slowly get used to the other's presence, and ‘waste time’ with each other.

They develop rituals and routines familiar to the other, and over time they come to expect each other and miss each other if one is gone.

² David Lower “Homiletical Perspective” in 2015. *Feasting on the Gospels: A Feasting on the Word Commentary*. (Gospel of John, Vol. 2.) Edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox. 5

³ Genesis 3.9, John 1.38

⁴ Taylor, Barbara Brown. “The Voice of the Shepherd.” 1993. *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley.

The fox says, ‘You become responsible forever for what you have tamed,’ (so that) ‘One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.’”⁵

TIME

So God can appear in lightning or in a burning bush BUT more often it’s the still small voice of God, it’s a prayer group, it’s a loving friend on the other end of a phone call. It’s a spouse or a child or a sibling somehow modeling God’s unconditional love.

Hearing those voices for what they are usually require time, they require ‘wasting’ time with one another. People often talk about “quality time” but here we might think of it better as “quantity time.” Showing up at your job, being relentlessly present in your family, dare I say coming to church week after week. These are examples of quantity time, being tamed, wasting time to form the bonds that make all the difference in the world.

“Those aspiring to loving relationships, be it with family or God, must be prepared for lavishly inefficient uses of large amounts of time. Moreover, they must be prepared for society’s rebuke of quantity time as improvident.”⁶

Church, faith, etc. in other words, is the very opposite of a life hack, it’s the opposite of a desktop shortcut. A relationship with God is not an app that you can call up on demand to fit your whims.

CONCLUSION

So, St. Timothy’s, let’s waste time with one another.

Let’s mill about like sheep and get to know one another.

Let’s be willing to be tamed by the repetitive and Spirit-filled quantity of time spent with one another.

We are sheep, we don’t have much going for us,

We are hardwired to headbutt, to wallow around in our filth,

but we also have a Good Shepherd who knows our names and calls us out by those names into the still waters and the green pastures.

AMEN

⁵ Quoted in *Feasting on the Gospels*, “Theological Perspective” 4.

⁶ Originally here (Broken Link): Article by Kurt Dunkle in Seminary magazine

<http://gts.edu/generalnews/quantitytime?fbclid=IwAR2zm6s0aKQm0N2w1RjmSAMfEgGaTqwv9Wh3c0ucDvorxoZFhmLXJvVi9M>