**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**The Fourth Sunday of Easter
John 10: 1-10
May 3, 2020**

 We live in an age of unparalleled communication, don’t we? We are a society inundated with it. Information bombards us 24/7 and it does so in many and various ways: radio, television, the internet. Add to that he fact that we all carry smart-phones and we can never escape it. It has also created this new, 21st century phenomena: everyone believes they have something important to say. They want to have their voices heard and we have provided the means for that to happen. Facebook. Twitter. Instagram. Podcasts. Blog Posts. Youtube channels. When I was a child, I remember two newspapers, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the St. Louis Globe Democrat, and 4 television channels, ABC, CBS, NBC and locally, channel 11. That was it. Now, between cable, satellite and streaming services, there are hundreds of choices. Anyone, who wants his or her voice to be heard has ample choices and opportunities to make it happen.

 Consequently, there are a lot of competing voices out there, barraging us with viewpoints on so many different things, especially on matters of morality. But whose voice is telling the truth? It’s not that these voices don’t sound reasonable, because they do. In fact, from a human point of view they sound eminently reasonable. A woman should have a right to her own body, right? Shouldn’t it be up to her as to if she wants a child or not? Living together before marriage only makes sense, right? Why not test the waters before making a commitment? That seems a very rational position. Who are we to say what religion is true? It seems like there is one god who just has many names? If something works for a person, who am I do judge? You do what is right for you, I will do what is right for me? All those positions, from a human standpoint, seem perfectly sensible.

 Truth seems to be in a state of flux in our world. It very much seems to be in the eye of the beholder. I will personally watch a politician give a press conference only to hear the follow-up reporter tell me her view which doesn’t even come close to what was said. How can that be? Truth is constantly being twisted and turned, bent and shaped in order to replace what actually *“was”* with a vision of what people want it to be. But here is the problem, with so many voices, who do you believe? Whose voice do you trust?

 That’s the point of our Gospel lesson for today from John. Jesus is concerned about to whose voice we listen and he is concerned because, despite what our culture is saying, not all voices are equal. As Jesus shows us, some of the voices out there will only lead to destruction. Only one voice leads to life and that is the voice of, Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

 Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. It is always celebrated on the 4th Sunday of Easter and it is a perennial favorite of both parishioners and pastors. And I think that is the case because there is just something comforting and endearing about the image of Jesus as our Shepherd and we being his sheep. Psalm 23, our psalm for today, covers us like a warm blanket, “*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever*.” You have to read it in the King James . . . to do otherwise, at least in my opinion, is a sin! It’s no wonder, really, that everyone I know wants this read at their funerals.

 Yet, there is a more ominous aspect to Jesus being our Shepherd and we being his sheep: sheep are vulnerable and need protection. That’s the point of this agrarian analogy. That may not be the most complimentary metaphor describing us but it is the truth. Sheep are incredibly at risk to attack and danger is all around them. They are literally one of the few animals on this earth that are completely and totally defenseless and worse, they are easy lead astray. They are easily stolen. They are easily killed. Sheep need a protector. They need a guardian. They need a Shepherd who will watch out for them.

 This is why Jesus gives his sheep the warning in our gospel lesson. He gives a warning for his sheep at that time and a warning for his sheep during our time*. “Beware of the voices. Not all who say they speak for me, speak for me. Not all who claim to be my undershepherds are true undershepherds.”*

It is important, though, in order to help us understand what Jesus is saying to us today, to have a little background information regarding Middle Eastern shepherding. In the Middle East, then and still today, community courtyards or, sheep pens, would be built in which the local shepherds would place their sheep at night. The pens were an enclosure, sometimes a rough stone or mud-brick structure, usually square and only partially roofed, if covered at all. On one side was an opening through which not only the sheep could come and go but also the shepherds. Typically, a gate was in place but at times the shepherd himself would act as a gate by laying across the opening. The shepherd would be there to keep the sheep from getting out and to screen those who would try to get into the pen. When Jesus refers to himself as the *“door of the sheep,”* this is the image to which he was referring.

 According to what Jesus says, there is but one door and one way to gain access to his sheep, meaning, through him. There is no other way and anyone who attempts to get to the sheep via another way is simply a thief or a robber.

 Now, in the context of this passage, Jesus is speaking about the Pharisees and the religious leaders of the Jewish people of his day. These were the clergymen of his time and just prior to this parable about the sheep, Jesus confronts these supposed spiritual leaders with their own spiritual blindness. Jesus had just healed the man born blind and because the formerly blind man could clearly see that Jesus was from God, the Pharisees cast him out of the synagogue. Jesus has a confrontation with these leaders who asked him, “*What” Are we blind too?”* To which Jesus replied*, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”*

 But, why does Jesus call them thieves and robbers? Well, the Pharisees considered themselves to be the religious guides of the people. They were the experts in the Law and the Prophets and therefore, God’s representatives on earth. Whenever a religious question or issue would arise, the people would turn to the Pharisees. Using their voices, they claimed to speak for God and the sheep, the people, trusted the Pharisees, who, by the way, were overall a pretty decent bunch. I know we have such a negative image of them and, to be sure, they didn’t exactly befriend Jesus, but for the most part, they were nice guys, educated and probably many of them were charming. Furthermore, much of what they taught was admirable and worthwhile. Even Jesus says this himself in Matthew, chapter 23. There he tells us that they were conscientious, they gave to the poor and the widows, and devoted their lives to the synagogues. All in all, they sound like pretty decent fellows. Wouldn’t you agree? They had all the appearances of being legitimate teachers and undershepherds of God’s flock. However, remember: Jesus isn’t warning about their appearance. He is warning about their voices. He is warning them about what they teach.

 The Pharisees taught the people works righteousness. Meaning, they taught people that their relationship with God was based upon what they did and not upon God’s grace. Favor was something you earned by keeping the Ten Commandments and the ceremonial law. According to them, to be saved you had to figure out a way in life to do more “*good”* than “*bad.”* The hope was that the *“good”* would get God to overlook the *“bad.”* Now, while this may seem a reasonable approach from a human perspective, it is problematic when you really analyze it. Who here does more *“good”* in your life than *“bad?”* And remember, when we say *“bad”* we are talking thoughts, words, and deeds? Does your “*good*” outweigh your “*bad?”* Being honest, there is no way.

 But here is the thing, the Pharisees should have known better. The Scriptures were at their disposal and they could read and study them. The Old Testament speaks of salvation by God’s grace and not by our works. It speaks of God saving us by sending the One who would crush the head of the serpent. It speaks with a clear voice about what type of Messiah would come. He would be a servant. He would be a suffering servant who would sacrifice himself for the sins of us all. When the Pharisees used their voices to speak, this is what they should have spoken. They should have told the people that God saves us by grace, through faith, and not our works. That is what Jesus wanted them to speak. That is what he wanted them to tell his sheep. The Messiah is the door of the sheep and any who enter through him will be saved. But they taught another way in. They taught a way of works that excluded Jesus and as Jesus tells us, that way brings death.

 My dear friends in Christ, we are taught at a very young age the old nursery rhyme, *“Sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me.”*  While that is a good lesson for children to learn so that they do not let harsh voices on the playground bother them, I am here today to tell you that when it comes to matters of faith and salvation, words and voices can kill.

 Now, I am not trying to be overdramatic here. That’s just not my style but there are so many voices out there that are trying to steal you, the sheep of our Good Shepherd, away from him. They exist in our world *“out there”* as they try to persuade us that the way of Christ is filled with superstitions, contradictions and unnecessary restrictions on our freedom to live as we want to live. But the more dangerous voices are the ones that exists, *“in here,”* meaning, inside the sheepfold. The voices inside the church that encourage us to depart from the way of Jesus are far more dangerous.

 Each year in Chicago there is a meeting of the *“Re-imagining Community”* gathers. It is sponsored by the World Council of Churches, The United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church. They are all church bodies that proclaim to teach “*Jesus.”* Their stated purpose is to, *“re-imagine Jesus.”* What does the re-imagined Jesus look like? Well, Carter Heywood, professor of theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts said, *“While nobody, not even Jesus is divine in and of him or herself, everybody, like Jesus, is able to be god. And I use this (to god) as a verb. This why we are here . . . to god . . . The good news is that everybody is in God. Nobody is left out.”* To clarify . . . as if I need to clarify this . . . according to Heyward, we are not to worship Jesus as divine but rather we are all to exercise our own personal divinity. Does that sound like the voice of historic Christianity? Does that sound like the voice of our Good Shepherd?

 The fall of man into sin is re-imagined by them as a celebrated act of resistance. The participants, as part of worship at one of their conferences, were encouraged to sing, *“Taste and see how good is the fruit that falls from the tree. Taste and see how good is the fruit from the garden.”* Apparently, the newly imagined Jesus wants us to embrace sin.

 I wish that I could say that this is just a fluke example. Sadly, it is not. Were I to list all the examples of false teaching and false voices that come up with just one internet search, we would be here all day. These are the voices that Jesus warns about. These are the voice that lead to death.

 My dear friends in Christ, Jesus warns us today for one reason and one reason only and he states it clearly in verses 9 and 10 of our reading. *“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will come in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”*

That life comes through the cross of Jesus Christ and that is the message he has left to his church. That is what the voice of Jesus proclaims. His is the voice we hear and his is the voice we believe. And the voices that speak for him today in the church need to echo his voice. As his sheep, we are not to re-imagine what Jesus did but present it fully without modification and compromise. Those who do are those we as sheep are to believe. Those voices proclaim with all the power of the gospel that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, laid down his life for his sheep. He died for sinners. He died for you. There is no other Jesus to proclaim than the one who came, was nailed to a cross, who died, who was buried and then rose to life on the third day. There is no other Jesus to proclaim than the one who gave his life for sinners so that sinners may be forgiven and have life.

 Any voice suggesting anything else, is a thief and a robber for it robs the sheep of their salvation. And the reason we proclaim Jesus Christ and him crucified is that you and I, as his sheep, can come to recognize his voice. And as for me, Jesus’ voice, is the only voice I want to hear. Personally, I like the voice of our Good Shepherd. It cries from the cross, *“Father, forgive them,”* and, *“it is finished!”* It is the voice that promises he will never leave us or forsake us. It is the voice that leads we his sheep not just to life, but abundant life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.