

Fourth Sunday of Easter May 3, 2020

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Grace and peace to you... Alleluia! Jesus is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter. Every year, the Fourth Sunday of Easter is often referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday. We usually hear from the 23rd Psalm ("The Lord is my Shepherd..."). And the Gospel is typically taken from the 10th Chapter of the Gospel of John, where Jesus refers to himself multiple times as the Good Shepherd. Today, we read that the sheep hear the Good Shepherd call them by name, and they follow the Good Shepherd because they know his voice.

[As a child, I was one who liked to wander off. It scared the heck out of my mom when we went places because I liked to wander off to look at things and to talk with strangers and to explore dark hallways... You know, a mother's worst nightmare...

I recall one Saturday when I was a kid, I was maybe around 6 years old. We were at the mall... specifically, we were at Foleys (for those who remember the great old

Houston department store). And as my mom was shopping, I took my leave to go wander around.

Of course, after I spent some time exploring, and looking around, and meeting people, I finally got bored, and went back to find my mom... But she wasn't where I left her!

I started to panic. I began rushing around, looking up and down the aisles, the circles of clothes, past the perfume, make-up, and jewelry sections. I remember being so afraid that I was lost forever. I began to tremble and cry...

And that's when I heard my mother's voice— above the Muzak playing lightly in the background, above the chatter of clerks behind the make-up counter, beyond the buzz of people coming and going through the mall on a Saturday afternoon— I heard my mother in the distance calling my name. And I ran to that voice, and I found her. And she was so relieved to find me— mad as heck, too, but relieved. And I was so thankful that I recognized her voice.]

Take a second and think about all the competing voices you hear in a day. Voices from television, and the radio, from social media and podcasts... politicians'

voices, religious voices, voices from news journalists... voices of neighbors, and co-workers and fellow students... voices of spouses and children... voices that tempt and argue and lie... voices that gossip and bully and tear down.

Which voices do you listen to? Which are you drawn to? Which voices build you up and encourage you, and which harass and harm you?

In the story preceding the one we have in today's Gospel from John, Jesus heals on the sabbath day a man who was blind since birth. After being healed, the man is brought before the religious authorities who keep asking him about the healing. The man, who is just as astounded as his parents and everyone else, speaks the truth of what happened (as far as he knew), and yet the religious leaders gaslight the poor man. They insult him and call him a liar, ultimately kick him out of the community, telling him he is intrinsically evil.

But Jesus finds the man, and the man ultimately recognizes Jesus' voice as the one who healed him, and he celebrates and follows Jesus...

So, whose voices fill your heart with hope, and inspire you? Which voices bring healing to you and your life? Which voices cause you to sit up and pay attention—

or fill you with dread? And in the midst of this cacophony of voices, how can you hear the Good Shepherd calling your name?

The Good News today is that the Good Shepherd does know each of us by name, and calls us by name. And this includes each and every one of you. The Good Shepherd calls to each of us, and we hear his voice whenever we hear Good News of sins being forgiven, of relationships being restored, of captives being set free, of peace filling fearful hearts and hope filling despairing souls. This is how we know the voice of the Good Shepherd!

Friends, these are trying, chaotic times. This pandemic has killed and sickened so many around the world. It has wreaked havoc on the global economy and people's jobs. It has closed down thriving metropolises and overwhelmed our health care systems and placed our doctors and nurses in significant harm's way.

It has stretched us to do things we never had to do before, like social distancing, and stay-at-home orders. I mean just finding pack of toilet paper has been an epic adventure for many people these days!

And, it also means there are new voices vying for our attention. Voices that shout at us to only worry about ourselves, to hoard and panic buy. Voices that coo at us saying we'll be okay because we're young and healthy, so we don't have to follow health protocols. There are voices that try to blame the virus on a particular people or nation. And there are voices that whisper at us in the middle of the night that there is no way the world will escape this, and so it's just better to give up.

But in the midst of these new competing voices, the Good Shepherd speaks to us saying, "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly." That doesn't mean an easy life. It doesn't mean everything will always be hunky-dory, or always go our way. It doesn't mean there won't be suffering. But it does mean that we're not alone.

The God of the Universe has chosen to enter our humanity and accompany us through all the hills and valleys of life. And this God has overcome death and the grave. It's what Easter is all about. And it's what makes the shepherd good.

Alleluia! Jesus is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.