

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 8, 2022

The Church gives us the season of Lent to prepare for Easter. We know exactly what we are to do during that time. We are expected to make sacrifices throughout those forty days by giving up meat on Fridays, fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and taking on other penances. All this is meant to help us look squarely at our sinfulness and work on repairing our relationship with God. We aim to be better Christians so that, when Easter rolls around, we can renew our baptismal vows. That is what Lent is all about.

But, when Easter does finally arrive and we are done with all the penitential practices, what are we to do then? Do we just go back to life as normal, the way it was on the Tuesday before Lent began? Or are we meant to live differently?

Just as there is a whole season leading up to Easter, so the Church gives us a whole season after Easter. This Easter Season is actually longer than Lent - ten days longer, in fact. The purpose of the Easter Season is to train us in how to live as baptized disciples of Jesus Christ. Now that we have struggled to put our sinfulness aside, we learn how to live in the light of Jesus' resurrection. Easter is meant to teach us that the Christian life is not just about avoiding evil but about actively doing good for others.

That brings us to today's gospel. Every Fourth Sunday of Easter, we celebrate our Risen Lord under the title of Good Shepherd. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life to save His sheep. He goes out to seek those who are lost to bring them back to the fold. He protects us from the wolves who want to attack us and He heals us when we have been wounded.

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So, living the Christian life as baptized disciples means that we belong to the flock of God with Jesus our Risen Lord as our shepherd.

It is interesting that Jesus refers to His followers as sheep. Sheep are among the mildest of animals. They do not have pecking orders like birds do. There are no "alpha sheep" the way there are "alpha dogs". There are no leaders among the sheep. They simply follow one another with no regard to where they are going. They are trusting animals that are happy just to eat grass.

Just so, in the flock of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, we are all on equal footing. Even though there are leaders among us - namely, deacons, priests, and bishops - we all follow the same rules. We are all expected to love one another with no regard for a person's title or rank. Just look around this church. There is no VIP seating and no places of honor. In fact, the one we gather here to celebrate - Jesus Christ - takes His place on the cross. If our Good Shepherd humbled Himself by dying on a cross, then we must humble ourselves by serving one another out of love. As Jesus told His disciples before He died, "The greatest among you will be the one who serves the rest." So, like sheep, we do not seek the first place but to fall into line behind Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd.

Jesus tells us that His sheep are the ones who hear His voice. Sheep can make out the voice of their shepherd, even when other people are around. They snap to attention when the shepherd calls them. Just so, as members of God's flock, we should be able to hear the voice of Jesus when He calls out to us. There is so much noise in our world, and so many people trying to get our attention. Everyone is trying either to sell us a product or

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convince us of their message. If we are true followers of Jesus Christ, we seek to block out that noise, because we want to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd. We need to take time every day to listen to Jesus and allow His word to shape our minds, hearts, and consciences. Otherwise, we'll be led astray by all the enticements and pleasures of our society.

During Lent, many of us dedicated more time to prayer. If we did that with sincerity and devotion, then that prayer time became something more than a way to prepare for Easter. Hopefully, that prayer time became a daily habit, something we cannot live without. If we are to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd, then we need that time of silence to filter out all the noise around us and focus in on the gentle voice of Jesus.

In today's gospel, Jesus goes on to say that His sheep are the ones who follow Him. They are not going off on their own. They are not looking for other shepherds. They are not looking to start their own flocks. Rather, they follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

If we are to be disciples of Jesus Christ, then, we have to give up our own plans and our own ideas of what it means to have a fulfilled life. It means not following our own path, but following the path that Jesus, our Good Shepherd marks out for us.

In today's society, it can be very tempting to look at Christianity as a self-help program. When we have this attitude, we listen to the teachings of Jesus that make sense to us and fit our life-style, and ignore the rest. In this case, Jesus is not THE Good Shepherd but one shepherd among many others.

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That is not what Jesus is calling us to. He wants to be the center of our lives. He wants us to follow Him, to go where He leads us. It means sometimes not understanding where the path will lead but going anyway because we trust that Jesus will never lead us astray. It means sometimes going where we'd rather not go out of love for Jesus knowing that, if He leads us there, it is the best place for us. Many times it means leaving behind family and friends so that we can be close to the Good Shepherd.

We do all this because of the promise that Jesus makes us - "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish." When we draw near to Christ and become part of His flock, we are in the safest place we could ever be. It does not mean that it will always be easy. It does not mean that we will never experience pain. But it does mean that we will always be near Jesus and that, in the end, we will experience the eternal life our hearts long for. That is what this Easter Season is about - allowing God to draw us into loving intimacy with our Good Shepherd.