

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

So whose voice are you listening to these days?

“My sheep hear my voice,” says Jesus. “I know them, and they follow me.” It’s the fourth Sunday of Easter and that means it’s Good Shepherd Sunday (as you just heard me telling the kids). I’ve told the story of my grandfather’s sheep before. I know I’ve used it in a children’s sermon or two, how my sisters and I would go running to the fence if the sheep were out and they would just stand there looking at us. But when my grandfather called them, they would immediately come running into the barn. They knew his voice. And they knew when he called them that there would be food for them in the barn – something better, apparently, than all that grass they were continually chewing on. So ever since my childhood I have had a first hand experience to apply to Jesus’ words, “my sheep hear his voice.” But it took some time before I realized how that applied to me. And how, maybe sometimes, it didn’t.

So let me ask again: whose voice are you listening to? Who is your shepherd? In his large catechism, written for pastors to use in teaching the adults in their congregations, Martin Luther wrote this to explain the first commandment’s injunction to have no other gods: “Anything on which your heart relies and depends... that is really your God.” I think Luther could also just as easily have said, “anyone whose voice you listen to and follow, that is your shepherd.” Let me give you another example from my own personal experience. I got a letter in the mail from the IRS on Friday that said that we underpaid our federal income tax this year and needed to send them a check by May 26 or face further interest and penalties. (By the way, this is how the IRS contacts you if you owe them money. They don’t call you on the phone and they don’t send you e-mails, just in case you had any doubt about those scams.) Now I was heading out the door to the hardware store to get some supplies for a backyard project when I took the mail in and saw this letter, but let me tell you that I put that errand on hold and went upstairs to our files to try and sort this out. I figured out that this is something that goes back to 2016, and also that my accountant is going to have to figure it out. So I scanned the letter and sent it to him. But that was late afternoon on Friday so I didn’t hear from him until tomorrow at the earliest. Anyway, my point is that the voice of the IRS is one that I listen to. Why? Out of fear. Because if I don’t, I can get in real trouble. It’s the same reason I pull over if a police car is behind me with it’s lights on. The same reason I stop at a red light. So the law of the land, established and enforced by our government, is my shepherd.

And guess what? This is actually a biblical understanding of the term. The image of a shepherd is first used in the Bible for the kings of Israel, whom God called to govern God’s people. And it is used by the prophets, like Ezekiel and Jeremiah, to point out how the kings had been unfaithful, how they had taken advantage of their position to benefit themselves at the expense of the people they were supposed to be protecting and providing for. Here’s what Ezekiel writes: “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.” (Ezekiel 34:2-3) And in a similar vein Jeremiah writes: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord... I will attend to you for your evil doings...” (Jeremiah 23:1-2) God regards it as a significant betrayal when kings or other governmental leaders abuse and neglect their responsibilities, especially those who claim to rule in

God's name. And I have to think that God cares just as much about the political and governmental leaders of our own time and place as those of ancient Israel.

OK, so now that you see that Jesus is using what we might call a politically loaded term when he talks about himself as the Good Shepherd, I want to say a few things about the sheep-shepherd relationship and Jesus' use of that imagery that apply to us and our context.

First, sheep need shepherds. Sheep are not wild animals any more. If they were self-sufficient they wouldn't need shepherds. But they are not very smart, and they are pretty defenseless when it comes to predators like wolves. So they need to be cared for. If a shepherd fulfilled that duty, he was a good shepherd. If he did not, then he was a bad shepherd. To say, as I did a minute ago, that the government is at least in some sense our shepherd opens up the question of whether it is a good shepherd or a bad shepherd. If it is a tool to exploit some while enriching others, it is a bad shepherd. If it serves the common good and makes reasonable provision for those who are unable to fend for themselves, then it is a good shepherd.

Second, shepherds took care of sheep that belonged to someone else. In the ancient world, shepherds were manual laborers who didn't own the sheep they were hired to care for. Their job was to take them out to pasture and bring them into to a sheepfold at night for protection. And then to keep an eye out for predators and thieves. The shepherds were accountable, in other words, to a higher authority. Here's the twist, though, in our system. If this still is a democracy and the things I learned back in school are still true in some sense, then we are collectively the shepherds in our context, as well as being the sheep. That makes us collectively responsible for seeing to it that the shepherding job gets done, that people are cared for and empowered, not exploited and used.

Third, in stepping in to the shepherding role and calling himself the Good Shepherd, Jesus is saying in no uncertain terms, with Ezekiel and Jeremiah, that the shepherds have not been doing a good job. In our system that is a direct critique of us. But at the same time that is also good news. And what is crucially different about Jesus is what he says right at the end of our Gospel reading this morning. "I and the Father are one." That means he's not your usual shepherd. The sheep are not only his responsibility to care for, they belong to him.

The other difference is that Jesus' sheep are also called upon to be his partners in the job of shepherding. As those who have been claimed by Jesus in the waters of Holy Baptism as his own, we are also commissioned with Peter to "feed Jesus' sheep and tend his lambs." We are charged with the responsibility of being the Good Shepherd's ongoing presence in the world, and that charge extends to both sides of the church-state divide in our context. We are called to work through our system of government or to change it where it is in need of reform, and we are also called to work outside of that system, and beyond it, by being a community of faith embodying and modeling the reconciling love and forgiveness of God, so that through his body the church Jesus may continue to draw all people to himself and give us the life that God has intended for them, and us, all along.

So whoever's voice you have been listening to lately, whatever other shepherds you've been following, hear this from the Good Shepherd: "You belong to me. I have claimed you as my own. I will never give up on you." My God grant us grace to trust this promise of our baptism, to be faithful in our calling as his partners, and to be fitting witnesses of the good news that Christ is risen, Alleluia! [Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!]