

The Voice of the Good Shepherd

“I am the Good Shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me...and they will listen to My voice.” Contrast this with what we’ve heard so often over the past year or so, *“God is trying to get our attention. This is God trying to tell us something.”* Don’t get me wrong. I absolutely agree with this sentiment. God is trying to get our attention. He is trying to tell us something. I don’t doubt that one bit. However... do we hear what He’s saying or are we only hearing what we want to hear? More importantly, are we listening to Him, or is He just another opinion among many that we can take or leave, depending on how it makes us feel?

You know what? Let’s not even consider all this within the narrow context of just these past twelve months. Take an honest look at your life as a whole. Can you honestly say that you ***always*** know and hear and listen to the voice of your Good Shepherd? How often do you listen to the other voices whispering in your ears, calling you to march to the beat of your own drum? We do like to be in charge. How often do the sweet siren songs of the world and your own selfish desires tickle your ears and your heart, seducing you away from the voice of the Shepherd? *“Did God really say...?”* How often do you not like what the Good Shepherd has to say to you? The Truth hurts, and there are plenty of times that we ***prefer the lies that the devil, the world, and our own sinful hearts will tell us*** because—let’s face it—the lie tells us exactly what we want to hear. We can always find someone who will tell us what we want to hear. The Truth hurts, but the lie makes us feel good, and who doesn’t want to feel good and have things their way? *“My sheep know Me and they listen to My voice.”* You have to admit: Our “Christian nation” has listened to and put more faith in the words of self-serving politicians and unelected bureaucrats this past year than in the words and promises of our Immanuel Savior. Our “Christian nation” has feared bad publicity and illness and suffering and mortality far more than they’ve feared God; the Giver of Life and Immortality. Empty pews and unused communion supplies don’t lie.

The thing is, folks, that ***we’re all guilty***. It’s tough to admit, and sadly some will ***deny*** it. *“Not me! I always listen to the Good Shepherd. I never stray. I know His voice, and I always follow it.”* If that were true, then you’d have nothing to repent over, right? How could you sin if you’re ***always*** listening to the Good Shepherd? Now, I know that no one is that foolish! Still... acknowledging the fact that we are sinners, if we ***always*** listened to the voice of the Good Shepherd, then we would hear the Truth of our sin and ***immediately*** repent and cry out for mercy. Yeah... that doesn’t ***always*** happen, does it?

Here’s a real simple way of looking at things: If we always listened to the voice of our Good Shepherd, we would have perfect church attendance each and every week. No one would ever miss, right? Isn’t this where your Good Shepherd

promises to be? Isn't this where your Good Shepherd calls you to be—to the green pastures and cool waters where His Word is rightly taught and His sacraments rightly administered? Isn't this the Sabbath rest your Good Shepherd calls you to honor and observe so that He can feed you and nourish you with His life-giving Word and Sacraments?

All true theology is Christology, and all true Christology is ecclesiology, which is just a fancy way of saying that all true knowledge of God is knowledge of Christ (Christology), and all true knowledge of Christ can only be known here—where Christ is—in His Church (ecclesiology), specifically where He dwells with us in, with, and under His Word and Sacraments. Despite what the devil, the world, and your own sinful heart may tell you, you can't truly know Christ apart from His means of grace. Unfortunately, though, we can always seem to justify our reasons for not listening and instead despising Christ and His gifts. We can always justify and make excuse for our wayward wanderings and absences. We can always rationalize our *selective, buffet-style of faith*. I want you to give this some serious thought. Every time we attempt to justify our sin or make an excuse for our sin, **we are not listening to what God has already said about that sin.** God doesn't merely offer up His opinions. He doesn't call us to debate with Him. He doesn't call us to make excuses for our sins. He calls us to repent of our sins. “*God is trying to get our attention! He's trying to tell us something!*” Yes! Repent! As a nation, as a culture, as one single solitary sheep: Repent!

Let's shift the focus. Just consider all that has happened over these past many months. All the darkness. All the uncertainty. All the fear. And yet through it all, the voice of our Good Shepherd *never wavered or faltered*. The Good Shepherd's voice continued to cry out to us, not from some far-off heavenly quarantine, but from our very midst. *Our Lord—our Immanuel—was right here with us!* Even as we made our way through the shadowy valley of death and fear and despair, our Shepherd was right here, leading us to the green pastures and cool waters of His life-giving Word and Sacrament. Even in the midst of lockdowns and quarantines and empty store shelves and pantries, *our cups overflowed... and they continue to overflow*. Talk about a peace that truly surpasses all understanding!

Look to this altar. Look to this baptismal font. Look to the pulpit and the lectern. ***Look... and listen.*** Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away all the sin of the world. Behold, the Lamb of God, who laid down His life as an all-redeeming sacrifice for the sins of the entire world—your sin, my sin, and even the sin of the person you don't like. Listen to the Good Shepherd as He speaks tenderly to you, “*Take and eat. Take and drink. This is My body and My blood for the forgiveness of all your sin.*” Folks: As members of God's holy flock, even in the midst of this shadowy valley of death, ***this is our joy***. This is our ***concord*** (one heart). That means this (Christ in Word and Sacrament) is what ties and unites

faithful Christians of all ages, ethnicities, cultures, and times together as one holy Christian Church; one flock under one Good Shepherd. One Lord, one faith, one baptism.

My dear little flock: You know what we've come through this past year. Your Good Shepherd has been here for you all along. Who knows what's still in store for us? Maybe things will get better. Maybe they won't. Maybe this is as good as its ever gonna get. (Yikes!) Come what may—richer, poorer, sickness, health, war, peace... and everything in between—your Good Shepherd does not change. His love for you does not and will not change. *“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* Don't ever forget that! Regardless of what's going on in this fallen and sinful world; no matter how dark and scary things may seem in your life, your Good Shepherd loves you and He will never leave you or forsake you. He loves you so much that He willingly laid down His life for you. Do not take this lightly! The wage for your sin is death. The penalty for your sin required death, and the Good Shepherd died that death for you. He sacrificed Himself in your place so that you may have life and have it in over-flowing abundance. That's how much He loves you.

May God grant you the wisdom and humility of saving, repentant faith all your remaining days so that you may be able to recognize and understand and appreciate just how much your Good Shepherd does love you and **actively** cares for you. May your ears of faith be opened to always hear and listen to and hold fast to the voice of your Good Shepherd. May your eyes of faith, ***opened through the hearing of the Word***, be always opened to recognize your Good Shepherd and His very present love for you, even in the midst of your trials and tribulations. My little flock: Repent and rest and enjoy the comfort, peace, and healing that is found only in the green pastures, cool waters, and open arms of your truly Good Shepherd.

In His most holy and precious name; the very name you bear by virtue of your baptism into Him... **AMEN.**