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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
April 21, 2024
3rd Sunday after Easter

Scripture Lessons: Acts 20:28-32, John 10:11-18
Hymns: 436; 783; 431; 51

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: 1 John 4:1-6

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard is coming and is already in the world. ⁴You are from God, dear children, and you have overcome the false prophets, because the one in you is greater than the one in the world. ⁵They are from the world. That is why they speak from a worldly perspective and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. The one who knows God listens to us, but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. That is how we can distinguish between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”
(EHV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, the Good Shepherd who gave His life for the us sheep, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice.”

In John chapter 10, that chapter often referred to as the Good Shepherd chapter, Jesus makes that observation about us, those who believe in Him as our Lord and Savior, and follow Him, *“The sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”* (John 10:3-5)

That remains an important concern for us, because there remain many other voices out in the world calling to us, the sheep of Jesus’ pasture, attempting to entice us to follow them. It is critical to our spiritual health and wellbeing that we stay with the Good Shepherd. Jesus also spoke these words that same day when there was a division among the Jews and some were challenging Jesus while others supported Jesus, *“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. ²⁸And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.”*

(John 10:27-28)

Those false voices, those strangers, can’t pluck you out of Jesus’ hand, but too many children of God through simple neglect, or outright rejection of Jesus’ word, have leaped out of Jesus’ hand. In our Scripture lesson this morning we read of not only Paul’s concern, but also the Holy Spirit’s concern that faithful “undershepherds” or pastors be called and set in place to lead the Church of God which Jesus purchased with His own blood. That is the message the Holy Spirit would bring to us on this Good Shepherd Sunday, that we do not listen to the voice of strangers but continue to follow the voice of the Good Shepherd. We hear His voice, and follow Him throughout this life, as He *“leads us in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake,”* until we also *“dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”* (Psalm 23:3, 6)

THEME: Be Sure You’re Listening to the Good Shepherd.

There are a great many “voices” out there in the world; many of whom claim to possess superior wisdom and the foundation of science. Others, a great many others, present themselves as true

undershepherds of Jesus Christ. Our first lesson is not to be too trusting. We are to –

I. Put Spiritual Voices to the Test: Are They Faithful to Jesus?

At first reading one might assume that this is a simple test to pass. *“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”* ² *This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,* ³ *and every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard is coming and is already in the world.”* (v.1-3)

John warns that there are many false prophets who have gone out into the world. He isn't just talking about the prophets of the false gods or gross idolatry. He is warning about those who would deceive by appearing to be in “sheep's clothing.” When Jesus presented that warning against false prophets, He said, *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.”* (Matthew 7:15) Jesus was pointing out that these false prophets not only appear harmless as sheep, but are actually extremely dangerous. He was also warning the flock.

We are gullible sheep. Dangerous false prophets will often look like they belong in the flock, like they are one of us. The most dangerous of false prophets are those who are recognized by the world, even recognized by Christians as being Christian. They will present themselves as shepherds; they are frequently pastors teaching and preaching. That is the point that John is making by inspiration when he instructs us to test the spirits. They are referred to as spirits because they are teaching spiritual things.

The test is to look at what they are teaching. Has Jesus Christ come in the flesh? That's the part where many, including the false prophets will say, *“If we believe in Jesus that is enough. We all believe in Jesus, so let us rejoice together, let's worship together, let's teach our children together.”* The false prophet will say, *“I am eager to teach you a thing or two.”*

Hold on, examine what they have to say about Jesus being the Christ. Are they actually teaching everything God's Word tells us about Jesus being the Christ? Are they teaching the truth about why it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and die? Are they teaching the truth about this being the only way to the Father? Are they teaching the whole truth about the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of faith? Are they teaching the whole truth and nothing but the truth about Jesus' resurrection, that it was a bodily resurrection. Are they teaching that Jesus will come again on the last day, on the Last Day, not a thousand years before the Last Day, but on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead? And the questions can go on from there.

We need to abide by the truth lest we be deceived and find ourselves not listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd. There are many false prophets who have gone out into the world.

Too many Christians shrug their shoulders, and say, "Ahh, it doesn't really matter, we are all Christians and we get along with this or that church or organization. They have more programs, more people, more neat stuff." They forget to mention, more false teachings that detract from Jesus as the Christ and His glory as our Redeemer and as the Good Shepherd who gave His life for the sheep. He gave His life for the sheep. Doesn't that count for something? Isn't that more important than fun stuff. The Holy Spirit doesn't say, "Test the spirits and see if they have a lot of neat and fun stuff at their church.

Doctrine matters. Teachings matter. That's what Jesus Himself tells us when He says that His sheep His voice, listen to Him. That's what Jesus says when He teaches us, "*If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.* ³² *And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*" (John 8:31-32) Doctrine matters. It's the truth of the gospel that sets us free from sin and guilt. It's the truth about Jesus Christ that assures you that your sins are forgiven. You do have peace with God. This peace comes to you freely, by grace through faith. Jesus has done all that is necessary for our salvation. The Holy Spirit has come into our hearts by the preaching of the gospel and called us out from the world, drawn us into the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd.

That takes us to the next important lesson on this Good Shepherd Sunday. We are to--

II. Remember Who Is Greater: Jesus, not the World!

“You are from God, dear children, and you have overcome the false prophets, because the one in you is greater than the one in the world. ⁵ They are from the world. That is why they speak from a worldly perspective and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God. The one who knows God listens to us, but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. That is how we can distinguish between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” (v.4-6)

Sometimes we are intimidated by the world, and the apparent power, or strength or success of those who oppose the truth of Jesus Christ. What our text lays out for us here is that we ought not be misled by this. The world listens to them, that is the false teachers, those who have not stayed true to all the teachings of the Bible, because they speak from a worldly perspective. They speak with authority, but that authority is vain, it is not the authority of the Word of God. It is the authority of science. They declare that science tells us the world is billions of years. Only a fool would believe the world is only a few thousand years old. So, they teach with the authority of science that God must have taken billions of years to make the world, and that God must have used macro-evolution to make the world a better place. Whoa! Doesn't that make us look small and ignorant? NO! NO! NO!

He who is in you is greater than He who is in them. They speak to accommodate this unbelieving world that denies God's greatness, and denies the truth of the gospel. They want you to believe that what they say has nothing to do with Jesus, when it totally undermines the truth of the gospel every bit as much as the truth of origins of the world and the universe. They teach that God brought death into the world as part of making the world, and that death is natural, that death is good. Bill Mahr said this last week that of course abortion is murder, and everybody knows it, but there are too many people in the world so what's the difference? Who is going to care? Who's even going to notice? Perhaps God cares.

The Bible tells us that man was made in the image of God. God tells us in His Word that sin, man's sin brought death in the world.

The Bible tells us that God loved fallen mankind so much that He sent His only Son into the world to take on our flesh and blood that He might die in our place and free us from sin's curse. That is the truth that is distorted and discarded by those who speak from a worldly perspective, and from societal authority support relative morality, teaching that there is no need for repentance, but rather each should be true to oneself, fulfilling one's own desires, everyone doing what is right in their own eyes.

You want to know how that turns out? Read the book of Judges. It's one of the major themes of that book, revealing how ugly things are when people do what is right in their own eyes rather than following the Word and will of God. Then it reveals the wonder of the mercy and grace of God who delivers and saves again and again, until the greatest of all deliverances was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. Don't be intimidated by them. Don't feel inferior to the world. Don't be afraid of the world. It's not about how great or wise or powerful you are. You have the Good Shepherd, the exalted and almighty Lord watching over us, caring for us, leading us in the paths of righteousness, advancing the course of this world's events for the advancement of His gospel, for the growth of His kingdom rule in the hearts of sinners. Remember the greatness of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Good Shepherd who gave His life for the sheep. By offering His life for us He won the victory over sin, death and the devil. Remember the power and authority of Jesus' Word. Our Good Shepherd speaks the saving truth to us, and He declares of us, *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.²⁸ And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand."* (John 10:27-28)

"The Lord is MY Shepherd!" (Psalm 23:1) What a comforting truth for us to hear and hold in our hearts.

AMEN.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.