

## **Worship Service - *"Lost and Found"***

**Easter 4, Year C,**

**8th May, 2022**

**Revelation 7:9-17 NRSV / John 10:22-30 NIV**

### **Prelude**

### **Opening Music (Video) *Mizmor L'David - Psalm 23***

performer anonymous by request, used with permission

### **Welcome Guests / Announcements**

### **Pass the Peace**

### **Opening Hymn *Holy Spirit, Come With Power 26***

### **Call to Worship**

This morning we gather in community, as Christ's body in this world,  
yet also as his followers, his flock.

We are reminded where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there also.  
Yet we are also called to be shepherds among the greater flock of humanity  
around us, in our neighborhoods.

Let us gather together to seek together the strength and guidance that will lead  
Us into unknown pastures in search of those sheep who have become lost or left  
behind.

### **Invocation**

We seek and find you in Creation, O God,  
in the world you have made and the people you have called.

Your vulnerable, powerful Lamb is our shepherd and guide,  
leading us to share the shelter of your abundant life.

Let us recognize you here in the beauty of this morning and in its challenge;  
may the Risen One, your Shepherd-Lamb,  
lead us to act for your justice and peace:

so that all may drink from your springs of the waters of life,  
and find their tears of sorrow and pain wiped away.

In the name of the Risen One we pray: Amen.

## Scripture Reading - Revelation 7:9-17 NRSV

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

**Hymn**

***I Am Weak and I Need Thy Strength***

**553**

**A Time of Prayer**

**Joys and Concerns**

## Pastoral Prayer

Holy One, we gather in your presence to give you thanks and to celebrate the gift of your motherly love, both gentle and fierce, both strong and humble, both kind and True. Your love has given birth to the whole of creation, supports and nurtures us, cares enough to correct us, and challenges us in ways that strengthen and transform Us. We offer you praise and thanksgiving for your unfailing presence in our lives and all of the blessings you so generously offer us.

Loving God, we thank you for the gift of motherhood and for the many examples of faithful mothers in scripture, like Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Lois. We give thanks for mothers the world over. We celebrate all those who have nurtured and cared for us, remembering especially, birth mothers, adoptive mothers, surrogate mothers, aunts, grandmothers,

God of generations, thank you for the gift of faith kindled and rekindled in us through the years. And thank you for those who have taught us the faith in sincerity and love. Today, we give special thanks and praise for our church mothers, the women who, like Timothy's mother and grandmother, steadily and without much recognition teach a new generation of children about the love of Jesus. And we celebrate the matriarchs who build up with compassion and strong shoulders young women and girls, revealing a deep spiritual life and love woven into the fabric of our church family.

God of compassion and joy, we know motherhood is a wide spectrum and our life together is big enough to stand in solidarity with all mothers. For the seen and unseen grief and struggles of women and mothers, we ache with you. For the seen and unseen joys of motherhood, we rejoice and celebrate with you.

May God bless all women on this special day; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God, the Mother of us all. Amen.

## Gospel Reading

### John 10:22-30 NIV

Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade.

The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me,

but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.

My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

I and the Father are one."

### **Message – *Lost and Found***

So when you think of caring for sheep, what's the first thing that comes to mind? Well, what do we think of when caring for any animal we are responsible for? Certainly we would want to make sure we have the right food to feed them, and that they have access to adequate clean water. Certainly for animals like sheep that are not capable of providing their own protection, we would need to make sure they have a secure shelter during the night, to protect them from predators and danger. But most importantly, they need tended. Like a lot of domesticated animals, sheep are particularly prone to trouble if they're not looked after well.

Ever since humans began breeding sheep for their own needs, they no longer prosper well without the care of a shepherd. Where once wild sheep did survive in much smaller flocks, being leaner and shedding their fleece each year, domesticated sheep have been bred to be larger, with more permanent wool, that makes them prone to parasites and predators without the proper care. Sheep tend to flock together in a tight group when faced with predators, which is what makes shepherding dog breeds so effective. They play on the natural instincts of sheep because they are viewed as a predator. But without guidance or shepherding, sheep tend to wander, and can become lost, or tangled in briars and bushes.

The Bible is full of imagery of sheep and shepherds, as they were central figures in that culture, both then and today. But to understand the meaning that imagery had to those in Jesus' audience, it's important to examine what meanings the shepherd metaphor had for the ancient Israelites. Certainly Psalm 23 very eloquently portrays God the Father as the ultimate benevolent shepherd. With God we lie in green pastures and are led by still waters, which is important because sheep much prefer clear still water to running streams. However, it's also important to recognize that bad shepherds are also another important metaphor in Jewish theology.

Ezekiel 24 relays the way bad shepherds behave. "Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the

injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill.”

So when we enter this conversation between Jesus and the men in the Temple, they have this history of viewing shepherds from both good and bad lights. We have the contrast of the promise in God of the green pastures of David's psalm with the stark rebuke from Ezekiel to the Jews in exile in Babylon, many of whom were the bad sheep who led Judea astray and away from God and God's justice. The setting for the story in Ezekiel is after Judea has been conquered by the Babylonians and the first group of Jews is led into exile in Babylon.

We often have this conception that all the Jews were sent into exile but that is not the reality. When these exiles happened in the ancient world, it was generally those who had influence and means who were taken captive. They were the ones who had wealth and could pay tribute, as well as those who typically made up the ruling class and exerted power in a culture. The first group sent to Babylon included the court of King Jeconiah and the rest of the aristocracy. So when Ezekiel is relaying God's pronouncement on the “bad shepherds” for leading his sheep astray and letting them be scattered about everywhere, they would know exactly who he is referring to, themselves.

Jesus uses this metaphor to draw the reverse contrast between sheep that listen to the good shepherd, and those who refuse and follow the shepherds that lead them astray. In contrast to the wicked shepherds of Ezekiel 34, John portrays Jesus as the good Shepherd, the authentic bearer of God's caring authority. When Jesus says to his critics, “You do not belong to my sheep,” he implies that they are wicked. They cannot see the truth of his testimony because they follow wicked shepherds, wicked leaders. Jesus says that the sheep of his fold “hear his voice” and “follow him.” It is this unity of hearing and doing that binds the sheep of Jesus' fold to him. In that unity, the disciples' relationship to Jesus is similar to Jesus' relationship to the Father.

This sense of shared purpose is further supported when Jesus states that he and the Father are one. Now we would be tempted to see this as confirmation of the concept of the Trinity or the Incarnation, that Jesus is God in human form. However, the Greek word used doesn't really convey this meaning. It conveys a unity of purpose. But most importantly it relates to belonging to a community, a flock of followers that cannot be snatched from Christ's hands anymore than they can be snatched from God's hands. Just as Easter is proof for Christians that Jesus is ultimately in the hands of God, not in the hands of the emperor or in the hands of death, so in our celebration we claim that we are in Jesus' hands, not in the hands of the powers of this world. What might it mean for us to live out of that confidence and trust, and so become the hands of Christ in the world? Whom are we willing to hold on to, as we are in the hands of Christ? Whom are we to hold?

Today's gospel story and reading from Revelation really reinforce this concept of being cared for by the good shepherd, of being part of a flock, of being held in the grasp of Jesus and God. But it also relays the reality of bad shepherds, those who lead sheep astray, those who put their own interests above what's best for the welfare of the flock. Sound familiar at all when we think of some who lead us?

The question we face is two-fold: how do we counter those bad shepherds in our world, here and now, and how do we reach out to bring the sheep lost in the wilderness into the safety and comfort of our fold? How do we find and welcome the lost? Both questions have the same answer. We become Christ's hands in this world. We reach out to make a difference in people's lives. Like the good shepherd, we lead people to greener pastures beside calm waters. We provide a safe space where they can feel comfortable to be themselves, whatever that may be, and to share their joy, their pain, their anger, their grief, whatever troubles them and keeps them isolated and alone. We step out in our community and see what needs the lost sheep have, and work to meet those needs, we truly become neighbors. Drawing on the example of Ezekiel, we speak out to counter and drown out the voices of the bad shepherds, who say it's okay to steal their curds and wool for themselves, who say it's acceptable not to heal the sick sheep or bind their wounds, that it's okay to let them wander and become lost, that it's all the sheep's own fault anyway. We have field work to do, our job is never done.

Our church can be that safe place where people come to find respite from the troubles they face in the wilderness. We can be God's shepherds in our community, the hands of Christ at work in this world, at this time. But it takes commitment, and effort. Signing up to be a follower of Christ has its cost; those stain-free white robes in Revelation come at a price, they often come with blood, sweat, and tears. But the end result is well worth it, isn't it? I hope and pray that we can work together to find those sheep in need of the comfort and security of our pasture and still waters, that we can work to ease the burden of those struggling sheep all around us, and be the hands of Christ we are called to be. Amen.

## **A Call to Serve**

Jesus, trustworthy shepherd and guide, invites all of us to follow him in the way of justice and peace. We recognize in him the voice of the Creator, and we respond in generosity and love. Let us offer our gifts to the Risen Christ, in the service of a healed Creation.

## **A Time for Reflection - *Musical Interlude***

### **The Prayer of Thanksgiving**

O God, take these gifts and multiply them for the healing of your beloved world; know that we offer them as praise to you: **Amen.**

## Hymn

## *Will You Let Me Be Your Servant 307*

### **BENEDICTION**

Go now with your trust in the good shepherd, and let us love, not just in words, but in truth and action. Believe in the name of Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

And may God be at your side, even in valleys of death. May Christ Jesus be the cornerstone of your life. And may the Holy Spirit abide in you....and tend you with love and mercy all the days of your life.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,  
...In the name of Christ. Amen.

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### **Postlude**