

# Worship Service “ *The Voice* ”

Easter 4, Year A

30<sup>th</sup> April, 2023

Psalm 23 NRSV / John 10:1-10      NRSV

## Prelude

Opening Music (video)      [\*The Shepherd Song\*](#)      Mississippi Children's Choir

written by Jerry Mannery and Tommy Tate, Malaco Records,  
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## Welcome/Announcements

### Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn      *Come, We That Love the Lord*      14

## Call to Worship

One: We are the church.

**All: We join our hearts together.**

One: We listen for the word of God through scripture.

**All: We feel each other’s joy and sorrow as we share in prayer together.**

One: Today, we share worship together, and remember we are one,

**All: We are the church, and we gather to worship our God.**

## Invocation

Incarnate God, You are the one who comes to us in Jesus Christ.

Holy One, You are the one who comes to us in the Holy Spirit.

Sovereign of Earth and Heaven, You are the one who calls us to recognize you today  
and every day As splendid *Mystery*. Gather our hearts and minds this day.

Kindle our God-consciousness. Let us worship you in awe and wonder!

Psalm of the Day      Psalm 23 NRSV

## Psalm of the Day (video) Mizmor L'David, Psalm 23 NRSV

Artist anonymous by request

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me  
your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head  
with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell  
in the house of the LORD my whole life long

### A Time of Prayer

#### Joys and Concerns

#### Pastoral Prayer

O Lord, our Shepherding God, come close to us now. Come near us in our time of need.

Shepherding God, we need you in our time of anxiety. We need you in our time of economic uncertainty. We need you in a time of a globe-trotting disease. We need you to bind our wounds, and pour your healing ointment on our heads .

We need the briars, and brambles, and burrs pulled out of our fleece and skin.

Shepherding God, you guide us with your voice, Help us to listen and follow no matter where your voice leads. Help us to trust you.

Shepherding God, protect us from the hired hands that do not really care for us and have neglected or abused us in the past.

Shepherding God, thank you for your son who laid down his life for those who follow him and for those who are not in the fold yet. Lord we pray for those who don't know the shepherd, whose life circumstances kept them from knowing the good shepherd. We pray that by our actions, our behavior, and our reaching out into the community, they may come to know you.

Shepherding God, renew us, guide us with your love and renew us with your peace. **Amen**

Hymn

*Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us*

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## **Gospel Reading     John 10:1-10   NRSV**

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.

I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

### **Message – *The Voice***

We live in a world full of voices. From the moment we enter this world, we are exposed to the voices of those around us. Those voices can have a tremendous effect on our lives, whether we choose to listen and follow them, or not. Our childhood is full of voices trying to teach and lead us: our parents and family and friends, our teachers, and for some of us, our church family and leaders. We have little choice in those early years as to what voices we hear, and often whether we can choose to listen to and follow the direction those voices provide. They often seek to teach us what we need to survive and develop into a successful adult. However, once we hit those oh so tranquil teen years, we begin to truly hone our own voice. We start to have more choice in what voices of others we choose to listen to, for good or ill.

I'm sure all of us can think of bad voices that we chose to listen to in those years, as well as voices that made a lifelong positive impact as well. Even the poor choices have the good effect of helping us learn which voices have positive value, and which ones to avoid in the future. These experiences shape how we choose which voices we value, and which ones we avoid, what we interpret as positive and negative. Often that decision is based on what seems to benefit us, and what can cause us harm in some fashion.

In our parable from John this morning, Jesus explores this concept through the use of a very familiar metaphor in Jewish scripture, that of the shepherd and the shepherd's sheep. Raising sheep has been a central feature of culture in Palestine for millennia. However, unlike shepherds in the West, they do not herd their sheep from behind with cattle dogs. They, instead, develop relationships with and name each individual sheep. When they go out to graze, the shepherd walks in front and leads the sheep, calling and urging them by name. This is the method used there to the current day. Such imagery lends itself to the shepherd metaphor throughout the Psalms and Old Testament.

God is often portrayed as the shepherd leading his flock of Israelites through their trials and tribulations. Jesus builds on this metaphor in today's story. He relates the importance of this relationship between sheep and shepherd. The sheep know their name and they recognize their master's voice. They know that voice is concerned about their well-being, and will lead them to green pastures and abundant life. Other voices do not compel them in the same way as the voice of their shepherd. Their master knows their value, and looks out for them to protect them from harm and theft. Yet, there are others whose motives are not so noble.

In that agrarian culture, sheep are like currency. Their value can determine your place in society, and they are one of the primary resources that one has to barter and trade for all that one needs to live a secure and productive life. Being so valuable, theft was and continues to be a real threat to the shepherd. So often those who had large flocks employed someone to be the gatekeeper for times like the night when the sheep were left unattended in the pen. Someone to ensure the sheep were safe and protected. Someone who only admitted those whose motives were true. Someone whose voice would lead them to those green pastures. The gatekeeper also kept out those whose motives were not noble, those who would lead the sheep astray for their own gain. Because of the value of what he was hired to protect, he was expected to risk all to protect the flock. To let others sneak in over the fence was to risk dishonor and shame.

There were many other voices in the world in which Jesus spoke these words. The words of the priests and scribes and the religious elites who taught that the path to salvation was obedience to the rules that benefited them and their kind at the expense of many. The voice of the empire that taught peace was found through force and violence, and only through the benevolence of the emperor, who deserved your praise and support. Voices that taught division and self-interest over the best interests of the flock. Voices that freely climbed over the fence and through the gate, and tempted to steal the sheep away and lead them astray.

The self-appointed gatekeepers of Jesus's day, the Pharisees, found themselves tempted by those voices. They liked the prestige and power their position carried, and lost track of what was in the best interests of the sheep. Their path no longer led to green pastures and sustaining waters either. They placed personal piety over the good of the flock as a whole. Lost sheep should be abandoned and cast aside, not sought out, healed and returned to the flock.

Into this comes Jesus as the new gatekeeper. One whose sole concern is the welfare of the entire flock. One who will keep out those whose voices cause harm and whose motive is division and discord.

And most importantly, one who will give his life to protect the gate, and the only one who lays down his life, yet still keeps his post at the gate. Jesus is still at the gate today. And like his listeners in our story today, we still have plenty of other similar voices around us today.

Some outside the fold, yet also some within the fold. Voices that try to lead us astray, that try to separate us from the shepherd's voice. Ones that try to deceive us like the false shepherds of Jesus' day. Ones that teach us that it's not the flock that matters, but myself. Ones that pit one group of sheep against another, saying that some sheep are better than others, that the lost sheep are lost because they are not good enough, or that there is something intrinsically wrong with those who are lost, who don't fit in the "normal" fold. Ones that tell us that what benefits them is what we need, that our praise should be directed to them alone.

I'm reminded of the book *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. In that work, the author uses the metaphor of animals who have taken over the farm to criticize the authoritarian regimes that took over eastern Europe after World War II. One edict from the ruling pigs that I still remember is "All animals are created equal, however some animals are more equal than others." How often do we hear that voice today? Or voices that tell us the gate should be shut, that there are some who do not deserve to be in the flock? The choice is clear. We can follow the voice of the true shepherd, and trust in the divine gatekeeper, or we can listen to the voices that would lead us astray: voices that sew division and discord; voices that say me, not them.

Which voice will you follow? And as part of the body of Christ, which voice will you be? Will you seek the lost sheep, or will you try to close the gate to keep them out? Does your voice lead to eternal green pastures, or does it lead elsewhere, to barren ground and splintered flocks.

Today, we have many frustrated voices all around us that try to lead us astray, voices of sheep that have gone astray themselves, that need to hear the words the shepherd brings. It is my hope and prayer that we can continue to trust and follow the words of our true shepherd, the words that have the interest of the whole flock in mind, the words that lead to those green meadows that never wither, and that we find our own voice to reflect those words, as individuals, and as the blessed flock that we are meant to be. May we always seek the sheep who are lost, outside the fold. Amen.

## **Call to Serve**

The Shepherd cares for us, providing all that we need in abundance. The Shepherd calls us to love one another in truth and action. May our gifts reflect our trust in the Shepherd's care. May our offerings show our willingness to love one another.

## **A Time for Reflection**

### **The Prayer of Thanksgiving**

God of love, you abide with us; you provide for all our needs and guide us in your ways. Out of gratitude for your care, we bring our gifts before you. Use them for your work of caring, that all may feast at the table of abundance, walk without fear, and drink deeply from the cup of compassion. Amen.

**Hymn**                    *I Am Weak and I Need Thy Strength*                    **553**

### **Benediction (resources)**

Peace be in your heart. Peace be on your tongue, and know you are forgiven; seek to speak in love. Peace be in your gut, to calm the rage that you feel; channel your anger into positive work for justice. Peace be in your hands, to help those in need, rather than to harm those who've hurt you. Peace be in your soul, knowing that you are not alone. God is with you, in the friends who share their love with you. Peace be in your heart. Peace be with you. Amen.

## **Postlude**