

Sermon – John 10:22-30; Psalm 23
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Grace Lutheran Church
4 Easter – Year C
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“By Hook or by Crook”

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!*

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. There was no place I would have rather been yesterday morning. It is a hard, holy thing to commend a fellow member of the flock into the hands of the Good Shepherd. What a blessing to be in this space; to share memories and sing praises, to hear the promise of the resurrection as we celebrated the completion of Evie’s baptismal journey. While I was here, our kids were already getting into their Saturday activities. So, after the memorial service, I texted Erika, wondering how Anders baseball game had gone. To which she replied: He’d like to tell you himself. Which was fine, except I wasn’t going to see Anders for another five hours. I had to wait? I confess that I don’t handle suspense all that well. I like to know things now, thank you very much. But as no further information was forthcoming, I simply had to wait. Spoiler alert: Anders and his team won, 7-6.
2. We like to know; to be in the know. Suspense can be enjoyable in books or movies, but in real life we like certitude, as soon as possible. So it was for those gathered around Jesus in Jerusalem during the festival of the Dedication, or Hannukah. How long will you keep us in suspense, they ask? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly! Is this Jesus the One they’ve been waiting for, or should they wait for another? And how long must they wait? The

motives of his interlocutors are questionable, however. It is possible that they are honestly curious, wondering if Jesus is the One on whom they should pin their hopes. It is equally possible, as scholar Tom Troeger points out, that the question is adversarial. The Greek could be rendered, "How long will you annoy us?" Perhaps they simply want Jesus to be clear in his blasphemy, so that they can get clear evidence for a conviction. This man said he was the Messiah; away with him!

3. Whether they're curious or confrontational, the crowd doesn't get what they're looking for from Jesus. "I have told you," Jesus tells them. Of course, he has done no such thing. In John's Gospel, the only time he has declared himself to be the Messiah was six chapters earlier, and the only person who heard him was the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus' response seems to indicate his belief that his questioners are not kindly disposed to him; he assumes they're not interested in a faithful relationship with the Messiah. If they were, they'd already believe. When asked here about his identity, Jesus doesn't tell them more about himself; instead, he speaks of those who follow him. He speaks of his sheep. They hear and know his voice. He knows them; they follow him. If you know, you know.

4. Jesus wants us to know that faith begins not with believing, but with belonging. On this day when we celebrate the gift of motherhood, I am mindful of the trust that young children put in their caregivers. Infants don't spend a lot of time crafting creedal statements of belief in their parents; they simply trust them. To feed them, change them, clothe them. Our relationship with Jesus is not dissimilar. Before we can put words to it, the relationship of faith is one we receive as gift and joy. This One we follow is the One who gives us life both abundant and eternal. We may die, but in him we will never perish, for nothing can snatch us out of his Father's hands. Before we know how to describe this faith, we simply believe, for the Shepherd has called us by name.

5. Part of the process of becoming a pastor is the completion of CPE, or Clinical Pastoral Education. This is an embedded experience, a chance to serve as a sort of assistant chaplain in a hospital or a residential community. I did CPE at a nursing home in Oshkosh, WI. One of my duties was to lead worship for those who lived in the dementia care unit. Because I was 24 and brilliant and didn't know a darn thing, when my first time to lead came around I planned a fairly full worship service. I even tried to preach a sermon. But I didn't yet know these people and they didn't know me. My words had no meaning. A CNA working the unit showed mercy, coming up to me and whispering in my ear: "Use words they know." The first thing that came to mind was Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd," I tentatively offered up. "I shall not want," they replied with one voice. We were off and running, God's ancient words of hope and comfort pouring forth from the lips of these dear people who were slowly losing themselves in the mists of memory loss. There was so much they no longer knew; some didn't know who they were. But Jesus knew how to speak to them. Jesus hadn't forgotten them. Jesus still knew their names, and they still belonged to Jesus.

6. If we wait for Jesus to speak to us on our terms, we might be waiting for a long time. But Jesus has spoken with all the clarity we need from the cross and the empty tomb; there is no greater love than a Shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for the sake of his sheep. Yes, death and evil continue to prowl around the edges of the flock. No, we don't get to avoid walking through the valley of death's shadow. Death came in Joppa for the disciple, Tabitha, and death came here for the disciple, Evie. But death does not get the last word, for Christ journeys with us through the valley and brings us into the endless green fields of God's love. Held in his hands, caught and cradled in his crook, we will not be lost. The Lord is my Shepherd, our Shepherd, and he is good. Listen to his voice.

7. And so we wait, but without suspense. In the revelation to St. John, God has given away the ending. Yes, we endure fear and anxiety, war and oppression, uncertainty about the future and assaults on our identity, diagnoses and death. But we already know the end of the story: Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb! The story ends not with power only, but with power exercised for the sake of the sheep in the pasture: We will hunger and thirst no more, for the Shepherd, the Lamb, will guide us to springs of living water. He will wipe away the last tears from our eyes. Listen, friends, as God speaks your name today. You belong to Christ; you are known by God. What else do you need to know? Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.