

May 3, 2020

St. Augustine Cathedral

10:00 a.m. Livestreaming

Fourth Sunday of Easter/Good Shepherd Sunday/World Day of Vocations

While most of the world continues to be on a “pause” mode, or in an extended “time out”, the cycles of Nature keep moving forward, and the beauty of Springtime is unfolding all around us on schedule. Our state’s “Stay Home--Stay Safe” Executive Order continues to be in effect, which means there are so many things that we’re not able to do; however, it’s possible that during this imposed “slow down”, we could actually realize anew how amazingly beautiful our world is.

With the beautiful weather that has finally arrived these last couple days, most of us are probably spending more time outside, and doing more outdoor activities like gardening, cutting the grass, and planting flowers. I’ve been trying to take a daily afternoon walk around my neighborhood, and each day, you can almost see the leaves on the trees opening up, practically watch the tulips getting ready to open, enjoy the flowering trees coming into bloom, and be entertained by the chorus of chirping birds. May is always one of the prettiest months of the year, and normally, it’s also one of the busiest with a host of events, celebrations and special occasions. While some States have begun to lift certain restrictions, here in Michigan, and in much of the rest of the world, those normal May events and special occasions are being cancelled or postponed.

We can see the same realities taking place in the practice of our Faith. We’re still restricted from gathering together to celebrate Mass; we can only “participate” in our Sunday Mass virtually; and we’re not yet able to receive the comfort and graces of the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Yet, the Liturgical Year continues to move forward; the celebration of Easter remains the focus of our attention on the 22nd day of this 50-day Easter Season, and the Readings keep proclaiming the Good News that Jesus Christ is Risen. As we heard Jesus Himself tell us at the end of today’s Gospel, the very reason why He came into the world is so that we all *“might have life and have it more abundantly.”*

The 4th Sunday of Easter that we’re celebrating today has a subtitle: it’s known as “Good Shepherd Sunday”, because as we just heard, most of today’s Readings use that tender image of the Shepherd’s Love and Care for his Sheep to help us to understand God’s unconditional Love for us. I should also add that the 4th Sunday of Easter is also known as “World Day of Prayer for Vocations” Sunday, and one of our seminarians, Andy Schmidt, will offer a brief

reflection on Vocational discernment for us after the Prayer after Communion today, so I know we all will look forward to that.

The most tender of all today's Scriptural references to the Good Shepherd, of course, is today's Psalm Response, the very beloved 23rd Psalm: "*The Lord is my Shepherd.*" For many people, that's a favorite Psalm to pray in times of sadness, grief, worry, anxiety. Perhaps many of us have prayed that Psalm frequently---maybe daily---during this time of worldwide pandemic---praying that "*as we've been walking thru this dark valley*", God would "*continue to be by our side to give us courage*". When King David originally composed this beautiful Psalm thousands of years ago, he wanted to provide the people of Israel with an allegory of what we might expect life in Heaven to be like. And since the land and conditions in Israel was mostly desert-like and arid, using images of "restful waters" and "verdant pastures" might convey just a bit what Heaven might be like. For people living at any time in the history of the world, including us in our current circumstances, to have a sense that there could be a time when we don't have to fear the darkness, or worry about evil, (or for us being infected by the coronavirus), or death; or to think about "*spreading the table with food*", *having our cups of wine overflow*, and *anointing our heads with comforting oils*---well all of that sounds very heavenly.

Yet, what Jesus has accomplished through His Death and Resurrection, and what we celebrate so joyfully at Easter, reminds us that Jesus has overcome all those ultimate fears and threats; we truly have nothing to fear. And what awaits us in Heaven is far greater than even the beautiful images described so tenderly in Psalm 23, because what awaits us is complete fulfillment, and eternal happiness with God. But before we get to Heaven, we have to make sure that we make our way properly through our journey of life here on earth. Once again, as Jesus reminds us, that's why He came; *so that we might have life, and have it more abundantly*. Left on our own, we don't know how to live in a way that will keep us from "going astray" or "getting lost". Jesus came to show us how to live; He came to be our Model; He came to teach us how to make the choices and decisions that will ultimately keep us on the path to Heaven.

So that's why Psalm 23 reminds us that "*The Lord is my Shepherd; in Him, there is nothing I shall want.*"

In today's Second Reading, St. Peter reminded us that "*we had gone astray like sheep, but now we have been healed by Jesus' wounds; (and) we have now been returned to the shepherd of our souls.*"

Jesus also used the image of the Shepherd with his Sheep, when we heard Him today say: *"I am the gate for the sheep....whoever enters through Me will be saved; they will come in and go out and find pasture.* Jesus knew that the shepherd's primary responsibility was to protect the sheep from predators. During the day, they would watch vigilantly watch over the sheep while they were grazing; but night time presented many unseen dangers. So the Shepherd would call each of the sheep to come into the sheepfold; the fact that the sheep knew the loving and caring voice of the Shepherd is what allowed them to respond to his call, and to come into the enclosure that the Shepherd had prepared. And then once all the sheep were safely in the sheepfold, the Shepherd would then lay down across the entrance. He literally "became" the gate---the doorway. None of the sheep could get out or get lost because he was watching them; similarly, no enemy or wild animal could get in to attack the sheep because the shepherd was there to protect them.

So, we too need to be listening to Jesus' Voice so that we don't wander off like sheep into dangerous places, or to go astray and get lost. Jesus tells us that our relationship with Him is one based on His Love for us---it's a relationship of tenderness and protection; it's about intimacy and concern. He tells us that just as a sheep recognizes and trusts the voice of the Shepherd, so we need to hear Jesus' Voice and come to Him, because we trust and love Him.

If you have a pet, for example a dog, you already know that first hand. Or in a more loving image, any mother knows that she recognizes and knows her child's voice, and will do whatever it takes if their child ever gets lost or in any kind of trouble.

My sister was telling me that her daughter Kristina, who's the mother of 4 little ones, from age 8 down to a 1 year old, had a bit of a scare recently. She and her husband Mike have been diligent about keeping their family safe and secure at home throughout this whole time of the pandemic. They haven't gone anywhere at all throughout these 6 weeks, and have only left the house to go outside for walks in their neighborhood. But earlier this week they realized that they had to go to two different stores to take care of some things. So they decided to pack everyone up in the car and take care of it all at one. The kids were so excited that they were actually going somewhere. When they got there, Mike went in one store, and Kristina very briefly ran into another one. When she came back two minutes later, and counted heads, she could only count 3 of the 4 heads; her 3 year old, Emmett was missing. When she asked the others where he was, they said: *"Oh, he went into that store where Daddy went!"*. Frantically, she went running into the store, and found Emmett just wide-eyed walking around looking at everything.

She got him, and firmly brought him back outside, and said: *“Why did you leave the car and go into the store all by yourself?”* And he said, *“‘cause I think there might be candy in there!”*

Jesus knows that there are many different “voices” that we might listen to along the way of our lives. Maybe it’s the very appealing “voice” of candy, calling us when we’re 3; or more likely it will be some other more dangerous, and potentially destructive “voices” that attract us, and maybe even lead us astray when we’re 33, or 53, or 73. All of us face those temptations; at first they look like they’re good or right, but which end up leading us away from Christ, and can lead us to destruction. So we always need to stay “tuned into” the Voice of the Shepherd. He loves us unconditionally; He will always lead us along the right paths.

Now the question is: do we recognize Jesus’ Voice? Do we spend enough time in prayer to know His Voice, and to grow to love His Voice; do we trust that what Jesus tells us to do is always for our good---for our well-being---for our eternal salvation. As He told us today, *“I have come so that you may have life, and have it more abundantly.”*

When Peter, just freshly filled with the Pentecost Holy Spirit, boldly proclaimed the Good News of the Risen Jesus to the people in today’s First Reading, we heard them ask the all-important question: *“What must we do, brothers?”* And Peter’s answer to them is one that we would do well to heed as well, when he said: *“Repent.”*

That word “repent” is very meaningful. It doesn’t just mean to have a sense of sorrow for a wrong that you have done, or a sin that you have committed; no, “repent” is a radical call to completely change our mind and our heart. Ultimately that’s what we all need to do; to get to the point when we don’t just try not to commit too many sins; or try to avoid mortal sins, but venial sins are just fine; or try to not commit any new sins, but we’ll just keep committing the same old sins of impatience, anger, bad language, irritability, and the list can go on and on. When we really listen to the Voice of Jesus, the Risen Lord and our Good Shepherd; when we realize that we have to stop “wandering off” like Emmett did to see if there’s candy there, or to pursue other “voices”; when we decide that we want to faithfully follow Jesus where He leads us---that’s when we’ll understand what it really means to “repent”. As St. Peter told us in today’s Second Reading: *“To this you have been called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example (of committing no sin), that you should follow in His footsteps.”*

Now we might ask---and with good reason---how can I possibly keep from committing any sins? The answer is that we can't do that on our own. But with the Grace of the Holy Spirit, and by listening to the Voice of the Good Shepherd, we can, and we will, be able to do that.

That's what Jesus means by helping us to have "life more abundantly". We don't just want to be alive; we want to be "alive in Christ", and that makes all the difference in the world.

During this time of the ongoing "Stay Home--Stay Safe" restrictions, let's not focus on what we can't do; let's pay attention to what we can do. We can use this time to truly "repent" of that which leads us away from Christ, and to remain united in Him. And the Lord Who is our Shepherd will make sure that there is nothing we will want: we will have the help and grace of the Holy Spirit, we will have the intercession of our Blessed Mother during this month of special devotion to her, and we will have the protection of Jesus our Good Shepherd by listening to His Voice, as He continues to lead us along the right paths. May we live our lives united with the Risen Christ, and live them more abundantly.

God bless you!