

So today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter. With the feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost left during these next four weeks, we are almost halfway through the fifty-day long Easter season. Here are the remaining coming attractions. The Ascension of Jesus is one of the three events in His life which make Him very different from every other human who ever lived. First, He was born of the Virgin Mary without an earthly father; His father, of course, is God in heaven. Secondly, He rose from the dead. And finally, His body ascended into heaven. There's a word. *Ascension*. Ascension means to rise or to climb. So Jesus' body just lifted straight up to heaven. The feast of the Ascension is in three weeks. Then the following week is the feast of Pentecost, the end of the Easter Season, when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples still all huddled in that upper room. So that's what's left of the Easter season.

Meanwhile, the fourth Sunday of Easter is also known as Good Shepherd Sunday, because no matter which of the three liturgical years it is (A, B, or C...we are currently in Year C), the gospel for this Sunday always comes from the tenth chapter of St. John's gospel, the whole chapter of which is about Jesus calling Himself the good shepherd. But before the gospel, we start with the first reading, as it always is during the Easter Season, from the Acts of the Apostles. The reading takes place in a city in Syria called Antioch.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles (**Acts 13:43-46a, 47-48**)

After the Sabbath service, many Jews and a lot of Gentiles who worshipped God went with Paul and Barnabas, who begged the people to remain faithful to God. The next Sabbath almost everyone in town came to hear the message about the Lord. When the Jews who didn't agree with Paul and Barnabas saw the crowd, they were jealous. Both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly. Then Paul and Barnabas told them, "The Lord has given us this command, 'I have placed you here as a light for the

Gentiles. You are to take the saving power of God to people everywhere on earth.” This made the Gentiles happy, and they praised what they had heard about the Lord. Everyone who had been chosen for eternal life then put their faith in the Lord. The word of the Lord.

It was the misunderstanding of many in the very early church, early meaning soon after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, that Jesus was the Messiah for the Jews, not including the Gentiles. There’s another word. *Gentiles*. Gentiles is the word used in the bible to refer to non-Jews. *We* (those of us who did not convert to Christianity from Judaism) are all Gentiles. Once St. Paul became active preaching the gospel of Jesus, it was his plan to include the Gentiles in Jesus’ promise of everlasting life. A very large part of the Acts of the Apostles has to do with St. Paul’s missions to bring Jesus’ good news to the Gentiles. Today’s reading is part of that story. What was not included in the part of the reading we read today is that there were many Jews and non-Jews in Antioch. When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Antioch, they went to the synagogue where they were invited to speak. The Jews liked what he had to say so much that they invited him to return the following week. But when nearly everyone in Antioch came to hear him speak the following week, including Jews and Gentiles, the Jewish authorities became jealous, which we did hear in today’s reading. They were especially upset when Paul and Barnabas quoted from the book of Isaiah that they are to be “a light for the Gentiles. You are to take the saving power of God to people everywhere on earth.” The Gentiles were happy about this inclusion, but again not part of the reading today was that many of the Jews were unhappy, so much so that they ran Paul and Barnabas out of town. But it is clearly stated in Isaiah that God wanted to include “people everywhere on earth,” which would mean that not just the Jewish people, but all people should be “God’s people, the sheep of His flock.” How interesting it is that today’s psalm is Psalm 100.

Responsorial Psalm (**Psalm 100:1-2, 3, 5**)

We are God's people, the sheep of His flock.

We are God's people, the sheep of His flock.

Shout praises to the Lord, everyone on this earth. Be joyful and sing as you come in to worship the Lord.

We are God's people, the sheep of His flock.

You know the Lord is God! He created us, and we belong to Him; we are His people, the sheep in His pasture.

We are God's people, the sheep of His flock.

The Lord is good! His love and faithfulness will last forever.

We are God's people, the sheep of His flock.

Now comes the gospel from St. John with Jesus' famous talk about being the good shepherd.

Gospel acclamation:

Alleluia, alleluia.

Alleluia, alleluia.

I am the good shepherd, says the Lord; I know my sheep, and mine know Me.

Alleluia, alleluia.

A reading from the holy gospel according to St. John (**John 10:27-30**)

Jesus said to His disciples: “My sheep know My voice, and I know them. They follow Me, and I give them eternal life, so that they will never be lost. No one can snatch them out of My hand. My Father gave them to Me, and He is greater than all others. No one can snatch them from His hands, and I am one with the Father.” The gospel of the Lord.

Again there are parts of St. John’s gospel that occur before and after the part we heard today that help us to understand better what Jesus is saying. But first let’s talk about sheep and shepherds. There is a story about a foreigner visiting the middle east, and he came upon two shepherds in a field having a chat with each other while a bunch of sheep were nearby grazing, which means the sheep were standing around eating grass. When the shepherds finished talking to each other, they said goodbye to each other and called out in their own voices, “Follow me.” Immediately the large bunch of sheep split up into two separate groups, one group for each shepherd. Each shepherd looked out and could tell that all the sheep following him were his sheep; there were no strangers, and no sheep were missing from either flock, which means each sheep knew his or her shepherd’s voice and followed the right shepherd.

So what happened before Jesus spoke about His sheep in today’s gospel was that the Jewish rulers asked him, “Are You the Messiah or not.” Jesus must have looked up in the air and let out a big sigh. He answered them that He does all these wonderful things in His Father’s name, but they continue not to believe in Him because they are not part of His flock of sheep. Then today’s reading starts with Jesus saying, “My sheep know My voice, and I know them. They follow Me...” It sounds just like what happened when the two shepherds said goodbye to each other and called their own sheep. Then what happens after today’s gospel reading is that the Jews tried to stone Jesus, but He got away unharmed. It sounds a little like what happened to Paul and Barnabas. In both cases the Jews did not like what they were hearing. Since they did not want to be included with the Gentiles following Paul and Barnabas, they drove

them out of town. And since they did not agree with what Jesus was saying, that is they did not want to be included with the flock of His followers, they tried to stone him.

In today's first reading we are told that the Gentiles who chose to follow Paul's and Barnabas' teachings about Jesus were "chosen...for eternal life." In today's gospel reading, Jesus tells us that "My Father gave them [His sheep] to Me." And "[My sheep] follow Me, and I give them eternal life." The Jewish rulers chose not to be included with the Gentiles or as sheep in Jesus' flock. The big question is do we agree with what Paul and Barnabas were telling the Gentiles in Antioch? Do we follow Jesus' teachings so as to be sheep in His flock? The choice is ours to be included. The reward is everlasting life.

And that, girls and boys, is the lesson in today's readings. Talk about it with your parents.

Fourth Sunday of Easter, 2022
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