

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Victorious*
Service Theme: *Fulfilled Works March Victorious*
Over Empty Words

Sermon Theme: Foresight is 20/20 (May 8, 2022)
Revelation 7:9-17

I'm guessing you all probably know the expression, "***Hindsight is 20/20.***" Basically, that phrase means that when you look back on something from the past, you have a much clearer view of how you could have handled the situation better because you now know all the details and circumstances you didn't necessarily know or think about in the moment. Like having a stomachache, and thinking, "I probably shouldn't have gone back for fourths at the Mother's Day Brunch Buffet." Hindsight is 20/20.

But even better than looking at the past with 20/20 hindsight is if you could look to the future with 20/20 foresight! How much easier would it be to decide on a job offer if you could see exactly where it would lead? Or decide whether you should keep dating someone if you could know exactly how long the relationship will last? How much more at peace could you be during health problems if you could see that the treatment will work? It would completely change the way you live your life, right?

But unless your life is way more interesting than mine...none of us have 20/20 foresight. So, we have to navigate through the twists and turns of daily life without knowing the future; by choosing which voices to follow, out of the many different voices that call to us in this world. Which voices you follow is important, because they determine so much about how we live and think.

On Good Shepherd Sunday, we listen more closely to one voice—the one who calls himself our Good Shepherd, and says, "***My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.***" But is Jesus really the

voice we should follow? Or are we better off following the voice of secular humanism and living only for this earthly life? Or the voice of subjective morality and living only to satisfy our own desires? Or the voices of the many other religions or forms of spirituality that call us to follow their paths? How can we know that we should follow the voice of the Good Shepherd when there are so many other voices that promise us the world if we'll follow them?

Because **Foresight Is 20/20.** God might not let us see the future about every circumstance or decision we make in life. But God's Word does give us 20/20 foresight about what our future is guaranteed to be when we follow our Good Shepherd in faith!

God gives us that foresight through 7 visions he gave to the Apostle John, who recorded them for us in the book of Revelation. In those visions, God explains current events, and foreshadows future things. But some of the things God shows John might make people wonder whether the Good Shepherd is actually a good shepherd!

In the same vision as our sermon text, God reveals some of the things we can expect to face during our earthly lives-- violence, bloodshed, and war. Famine and economic hardship. Physical suffering and death. Martyrs killed for their faith in Jesus. But doesn't it seem like a Good Shepherd should always keep his flock free from pain, suffering, or hardship? Wouldn't a good shepherd always keep his flock well-fed, hydrated, and protected from predators? And yet, we do see those things in our lives, don't we?

We watch the horrors of war as Russia levels Ukraine with bombs. We shake our heads as the morning news greets us with more overnight Jacksonville shootings. We feel the pain of disease and weakness. We worry about whether we can make ends meet. We wonder about the future of the church when animosity towards, and rejection of Christianity grows. If the Good Shepherd allows such things in the lives of his flock, some might wonder if Jesus' promise that "***no one will snatch [my sheep] out of my hand,***" are just empty words? Promises he can't keep?

A lot depends on what your expectations are of the Good Shepherd. Is a shepherd only good if he keeps predators from attacking? Or if he keeps his sheep safe when predators attack? Is a shepherd only good if he never allows his sheep to feel pain or endure hardship? Or if he helps heal his sheep when they're sick or suffering? Is a shepherd only good if he never allows his sheep to hunger or thirst? Or if he leads them to food and water when they do?

That was one of the problems the Jews had with Jesus. They expected the Messiah to be a political leader who would defeat Israel's enemies and restore their nation's power. But when Jesus revealed that he hadn't come to be that kind of king, many of the Jews sought to silence his voice, and followed the empty promises other voices made to them.

So we need to ask ourselves, what are our expectations of the Good Shepherd in our lives? That he'll give us earthly success? That he'll prevent us from experiencing pain or suffering? If you think, "I'll follow the Good Shepherd as long as he does _____," or "as long as he doesn't let _____ happen," whatever you'd fill in the blank with shows you what your expectations for Jesus are.

But what should our expectations be for the Good Shepherd? He himself promises, ***"I give [my sheep] eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand."*** And with 20/20 foresight, God shows us how perfectly Jesus keeps his promises.

As John records, ***"I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands, and they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"***

In a way, God reveals this picture of heaven to us kind of like the before and after pictures often included in advertisements for exercise equipment or health or beauty products. The pictures are evidence for

the consumer that "This product's promises aren't just empty words! See how it worked for those people!"

Likewise, this picture of heaven is evidence that backs up the Good Shepherd's promises to give his sheep eternal life; that they will never perish; that they will never be snatched from his hands. And as we see this innumerable multitude of people from every different background and place safe and sound in heaven, it's clear that Jesus has kept his promises! And as we look ahead with 20/20 foresight at this vision of heaven, we can be confident that when we follow the voice of the Good Shepherd in faith, we'll be in that multitude too!

But maybe the skeptic in us wonders, "How can you know for sure?" There are plenty of voices in the world that promise eternal life, joy, and victory like this. How can we be sure this isn't just a nice picture John paints to make Christians feel better about the struggles of life, but are just empty words and promises?

Here's the difference. Every other voice makes promises about a future yet to be grasped or accomplished that can be yours if you can just do _____." Or they make temporary promises that won't last in this world, or last beyond this world. But the Good Shepherd's promises of eternal life and eternal safety are a certain reality that's already been accomplished. Because they're not based on empty words that won't be kept, or on works that still must be done. Jesus' promises are based on the already fulfilled works of the Good Shepherd himself!

So many aspects of this glimpse of heaven show that. The white-robed multitude in heaven worship, ***"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."*** The salvation of the multitude belongs to God, meaning, he's the one that gets all the credit for it. And their robes are white, symbolic of holiness and righteousness because ***"They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."*** The multitude of believers in heaven are holy and righteous not because of their works, but because Jesus is their perfect substitute in his life and by his blood shed on the cross. And they wave palm branches, symbolic of victory, because Jesus has defeated the attack of every evil enemy—sin, death, hell, and Satan.

That's why the Good Shepherd's promises to us aren't just empty wishes, but the certain hope of all who put their faith in Jesus. Because they've already been accomplished through the fulfilled works of Jesus' death and resurrection. And that means eternal victory isn't just some future wish. It's a certain, present reality. What John sees in this 20/20 foresight from God are happening right now!

We're told about the white-robed multitude, "***These are they who have come out of the great tribulation.***" But the Greek has the sense of a continuous, ongoing action that is better translated, "***These are they who are coming out of the great tribulation.***" The world we're living in right now is the great tribulation, and all the things God revealed we'd experience in this world are part of it.

That means every time a Christian dies, the Good Shepherd has kept his promises and brought one of his sheep safely home to heaven where they'll have eternal life, will never perish, and will never be snatched from his hand for eternity!

That's why this vision is one of the most beautiful, comforting scenes in all of Scripture! Because it's 20/20 foresight evidence that Jesus has kept his promise! It also shows us that he's not just the Good Shepherd. He's our perfect Shepherd!

What things does a shepherd need to do for his sheep? Lead them to food and water. Protect them from harm and danger. Lead them to shelter and safety from the elements. Keep them from wandering off. And what does Revelation say Jesus does for his sheep in heaven? "***He who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water.***"

That truth can completely change our expectations of what we need the Good Shepherd to do for us. We don't need him to give us earthly success, or completely eradicate physical pain or suffering from our lives. We just need him to keep his promises to bring us safely there!

That expectation also helps us see the ways Jesus can use things like pain, suffering, and hardship to discipline us so we'll remove destructive habits or influences from our lives that might get in the way of our eternal home, to bring us closer to him, and to refocus our attention on our eternal goal!

When that's our expectation of Jesus, then we won't just follow him as long as he does _____, or doesn't do _____. We'll follow him, simply because he's Him, our Good Shepherd! Because we trust the Lamb, who was willingly slain and sacrificed to save us, to lead us through this life until we reach eternal life!

I love the simple, but profound way this vision of heaven concludes. "***And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.***" Every tear. Every tear from pain, sadness, and mourning from living in a world that's messed up by sin. Every tear from disappointment, frustration, or fear from following after so many earthly voices and their empty promises. Every tear. Every tear will be wiped away in an eternity where no more tears will ever be shed, except for tears of pure, unadulterated joy. One day, we'll see it with perfect vision. Until then, we follow our Good Shepherd. Because foresight is 20/20.