

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL

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Worship Series: Resurrection Reality

Service Theme: The Risen Savior Provides Good Shepherding

Sermon Theme: The Shepherd Test

April 21, 2024— 1 John 4:1-6

“I don’t want you to listen to me.” Yes, I said it. I don’t want you to listen to me. That might seem like an odd, counterproductive thing to say as a pastor who’s about to preach a 20-minute sermon to you. But I mean it! I don’t want you to listen to me. Maybe you’re thinking, “I wasn’t planning on listening anyways, and now I’ve got permission!”

But let me clarify. It’s not that I don’t want you to listen to me, as much as I don’t want you to listen to me for the wrong reasons. I don’t want you to listen to me just because I’m a pastor, or just because I’m a Lutheran pastor, or just because I’m a WELS Lutheran pastor, or just because I’m your pastor.

Nor do I want you to listen to Pastor Phil, or whoever the next pastor of Victory will be, or any other pastors from any other churches just because they’re pastors. Because God only wants us to listen to pastors who pass **The Shepherd Test**.

The Apostle John gives that same encouragement in the first letter he wrote by God’s inspiration to Christians in the province of Asia—modern-day Turkey. He writes, ***“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”*** You could replace the word “spirit” with “pastor,” and John’s warning would have the same meaning. ***“Don’t believe every pastor, but test the pastor to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”***

It makes sense for John to tell us to test the “spirits,” because ultimately every pastor’s message comes from a spirit—either from God the Holy Spirit who inspired the words of the Bible; or the spirit

of evil, darkness, and falsehood—inspired by Satan, the father of lies. We need to heed that encouragement, because as John warns, ***“Many false prophets have gone out into the world.”*** Which echoes the warning the Apostle Paul gives in our first reading from Acts, ***“Savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Men will distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.”*** Which echoes what the Apostle Peter warned, ***“There will be false teachers among you, who will introduce destructive heresies.”*** Which echoes what Jesus himself warned, ***“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”***

Over and over again, Jesus and his apostles warn about “bad shepherds” in the world, false teachers who proclaim falsehood, not truth. That was certainly true during John’s ministry. In fact, that was one of the main reasons he wrote this letter.

A deadly, destructive false teaching had infiltrated the Christian church. It was the beginning stages of a heresy that, fully developed a few centuries later would be called “Gnosticism.” The basic tenant of Gnosticism was that the spirit is entirely good, while physical matter is entirely evil. Gnostics therefore denied that Jesus was both true God and true man, and that he had a real physical body with which to suffer, die, and rise from the dead. They also taught that salvation could only come through a special kind of mystical knowledge and insight. Basically, Gnosticism took people’s focus off of Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord, and put it on human knowledge and wisdom.

Not only was this destructive false teaching leading people away from Christ, in his diabolical craftiness, Satan made sure this heresy was coming from inside Christ’s church! It’s kind of like how kidnappers sometimes trick children into going with them by claiming, “I’m friends with your parents! They asked me to pick you up.” To earn the child’s trust, they falsely connect themselves to someone that child trusts, even though their intentions are the exact opposite of the parents. Likewise, Satan loves to proclaim his lies and falsehood from the lips of pastors and teachers who connect themselves to “church” or “God,” so that people trust them, even if their words and intentions

are the complete opposite of God's truth. Because how many people can Satan pull away from Christ if he proclaims his lies from the lips of pastors or priests? If he covers his falsehood with a clergy robe? If he spews his poison from pulpits?

There's no question that out of his love, God calls and sends faithful pastors to serve as spiritual shepherds for his flock. The Bible uses that sheep/shepherd imagery often in talking about the relationship between God and his church, and therefore, it's also used for the "under-shepherd" pastors that God sends to care for the spiritual needs of his flock of people. That's actually where the term "pastor" comes from, from the Latin word for "shepherd."

But as John, and Paul, and Peter, and Jesus warn, there are too many false prophets, too many "wolves in sheep's clothing," or rather, "wolves in shepherd's robes" in religion and in churches to simply trust someone is telling you God's truth because they hold the title of pastor, priest, or rabbi.

So does that mean we can't have confidence in what a religious leader says? Should we follow the world's now prominent distrust of clergy? Not at all. We just need to listen to them for the right reasons. That's why John tells us the qualifications for a pastor to pass the shepherd test! As he writes, ***"This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God."***

John is certainly countering Gnosticism's denial that Jesus was a true "in the flesh" man. But he's also showing us that the number one, all-important thing a pastor should be focusing on, and focusing his flock on, is Jesus. And not Jesus as just another one of the many iconic religious leaders in world history. Not Jesus as one of the great prophets. Not Jesus as a psychiatrist who helps you solve your problems. Not Jesus as a wise sage who had some great one-liners to apply to our lives. Not Jesus as a role model to look up to. Not Jesus as a social justice warrior. Not Jesus as a divine vending machine who gives you whatever you pray for. No, pastors pass the shepherd test

when they prioritize pointing their flock to the Good Shepherd ***"who lays down his life for the sheep."*** A faithful pastor proclaims Jesus as the true, eternal Son of God and Son of Man who came to save this lost and eternally condemned world through his life, death, and resurrection!

Therefore, "bad shepherds," false prophets God doesn't want us to listen to are those who don't listen to or proclaim God's Word. As Paul writes in Ephesians, God's church is ***"built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."*** Therefore, a bad shepherd tries to build God's church on a different foundation than God's Word, revolving around the good news that Jesus is our Savior.

A "bad shepherd," John writes, is one who is ***"from the world and therefore speaks from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them."*** I don't think I'll surprise anyone in saying that there are plenty of examples of pastors and preachers watering down God's Word, celebrating what God calls sin, calling portions of God's living and active Word outdated and no longer applicable to people in our day. All in the name of drawing more followers for themselves by saying what the world wants to hear, rather than what God says the world needs to hear! If a pastor reshuffles the deck of his theology every 5 years or so to better fit the whims and wiles of society, that should set off "bad shepherd" alarm bells, because they're more concerned about bringing people to themselves, rather than leading them to Jesus!

What that means then, is that we need to follow John's encouragement and ***"test the spirits to see whether they are from God."*** How do we do that? We compare what the pastors are preaching with what God's Word says! To see whether an under-shepherd is a good shepherd of the Good Shepherd, we have to fact check them with God's truth. Even me! If you hear me say something in a sermon or Bible Study that you're not sure is true, I'll be more upset if you don't raise your hand, or come into my office first thing on Monday morning and ask,

“Pastor, where does God say that in the Bible?” And if I can’t point to Bible passages to back it up, I shouldn’t be saying it!

What then does “testing the spirits” require of you? It requires you to know your Bibles! It requires you to spend time reading, studying, and digesting God’s Word on your own, so that you’re able to verify that a shepherd’s message echoes the words of the Good Shepherd! That obvious requires some work and effort on your part, but it’s worth it so that you can listen to a pastor with confidence that he’s proclaiming the truth of God’s Word, because you’ve studied it yourself!

But is that what most people typically do in seeking out good shepherds or spiritually healthy places to be? Sadly, our sinful nature tends to view churches and pastors with a consumeristic mindset, much like we do with pretty much everything else in the world. For example, what are some things you’d focus on in determining which local gym you want to open a membership at? Cost, cleanliness, equipment, distance from your home or work, how many other people go there, what kind of programs they offer, whether you like the coaches and staff, etc. And you’d have every reason to focus on those things as a consumer of fitness!

But what about when it comes to your faith? Don’t we often also treat that like a consumer? We look at the church and decide which ones are for us based on the style of music, or the demographics of the other people that attend there, or what kind of programs they offer for you or your kids, or whether the pastor is young enough, or old enough, or funny enough, or dynamic enough speaker, or whether the message connects with what you think or feel, or what our culture thinks or feels.

Is that a spiritually healthy place to be though? Is that a pastor who passes the shepherd test? Or is that a shepherd who leads the flock not to the green pastures and flowing streams of God’s Word and Sacraments, but to dry, barren desert of culture and the sinful nature? A shepherd who turns a blind eye to the wolves who attack the flock, because whether he realizes it or not, he’s one of the wolves too?

The church and the pastors we need are those who point us again and again—no matter what the building, or the programs, or the style, or the congregants are like—those who point us again and again to the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep; to the one who allows us to overcome this world, because he has overcome the world and has taken up residence in us by faith; who reminds us, like the kids sang this morning, that we just wanna be a sheep of the Good Shepherd, and nothing else matters!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I thank God that over the past 5 years, God has given me the chance to serve as your spiritual shepherd here at Victory. As a sinner, I know that I’ve been far from perfect in the role. But I do pray that you’ve listened to me, and that you will continue to listen to me for the remaining months we have, and that you will continue to listen to the next pastor through whom God will bless Victory. Not because I’m a pastor, or because I’m your pastor. I pray that you have, and will continue to listen to me and your next pastor, because through us, you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd who has laid down his life for you, to call you into his sheep pen! Listen to him! And to those who point you to him.