

4th Sunday of Easter
April 21, 2024
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
1 John 4:1-6
The Risen Savior Provides Good Shepherding

1 John 4:1-6 (EHV)

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard is coming and is already in the world. ⁴You are from God, dear children, and you have overcome the false prophets, because the one in you is greater than the one in the world. ⁵They are from the world. That is why they speak from a worldly perspective and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. The one who knows God listens to us, but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. That is how we can distinguish between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Dear Friends in Christ,

In the fourth century of the Christian Church, a man named Arius claimed that there was a time when Jesus Christ did not exist. The Father is eternal but the Son, Arius claimed, had a beginning. The Christians of the time got together at a place called Nicaea and put together a summary of what the Bible says about the Triune God, with special emphasis on who Jesus Christ is. This statement of faith is the Nicene Creed. To this day, we often confess that Jesus Christ is “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.” This creed was necessary because the false prophet Arius was denying clear biblical truths about Jesus Christ.

In his first epistle, John warns that there will be many such false prophets in the world. In fact, false prophets were already active at the time John wrote the letter to believers in the first century. How are we going to ever know the truth when so many false ideas about Jesus and the Bible are around, more than ever today? Our Good Shepherd rose from the dead. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, teaches us to test the spirits with his truth. In addition, we have a Good Shepherd who overcomes the false teachers to keep us in faith until he brings us into the flock of believers in heaven.

The Good Shepherd Teaches us to Test the Spirits

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard is coming and is already in the world.

There are many world religions that teach falsely about Jesus. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, just to name several. There are also religious groups who claim either to be Christian or to follow the Bible who also teach falsely about the person of Jesus Christ. Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses for example. All of these will deny all or part of the following biblical truth:

Jesus Christ is the one, eternal Son of God who came in the flesh, lived among us, died on the cross and rose from the dead on the third day.

John urges his readers, including us, to test the spirits. It is relatively easy to compare the teaching of those other religions to the straightforward teaching of the Bible about Jesus and recognize that the other religions are false. John says it a bit stronger. “This is the spirit of the

Antichrist.” We’ve done Bible classes about identifying the one Antichrist. Here, John tells us about the spirit of the Antichrist, his way of operating, his teachings. Many false prophets follow the way of the Antichrist because he seeks to replace Christ. Therefore, any teaching that replaces Christ as the eternal Son of God who came in the flesh to offer his life as payment for the sins of the world is a teaching in line with the spirit of the Antichrist.

While this is most obvious in groups that do not claim to be Christian, the same spirit and false teachers are in the visible Christian church. The eternally begotten Son of God who came in the flesh to deliver from sin, death and hell is replaced by a Jesus who helps you get what you want in this world. You want wealth, follow Jesus’ plan. You want a good marriage and family life, follow Jesus’ plan. You want health, follow Jesus’ plan. There are obvious prosperity preachers in this world who fly around on private jets, live in mansions and extort their flocks for their own personal gain. And there are false prophets who claim to believe that Jesus is the eternal Son of God who came in the flesh, but don’t seem to find time in their messages about improving your life in this world to mention the most important truths about Jesus. Replacing the Jesus who delivers from sin, death and the devil with a Jesus who gives you stuff you want in this life is in line with the spirit of the Antichrist.

If you have been listening to a preacher or following posts online who is not preaching the Son of God who came in the flesh to deliver us from sin, you are to test the spirits against God’s Word. Stop listening to such preachers. Unfollow them. And if you are not sure about someone, ask me about them. Send me a link. I’ll look into it and help you to test their teachings so that we don’t go away from our Good Shepherd.

The false prophets are in the world and all around us. But sometimes the false prophet lives within. There are some things in the Bible that are difficult for our human reason to grasp. We are attempting to tackle these teachings in our Wednesday Bible class. However, most of the Bible is clear to us. But the little false prophet in us, our sinful nature, just doesn’t like some of the clear teachings of Scripture. It doesn’t like what Jesus says about greed and the love of money so our personal false prophet makes exceptions for people like us. It doesn’t like what Jesus says about sexual immorality so we make up our own rules. It doesn’t like what Jesus says about paying taxes to a government you don’t agree with, so while we pay our taxes, we justify being angry about it. The sinful nature doesn’t like what Jesus says about loving your enemies or what Jesus says about putting the kingdom of God above all things or what Jesus says about heaven and hell. So, the false prophet in us simply replaces Jesus’ teachings with our own interpretation. As we test the false prophets in the world, we are also to test our own thoughts and actions against the Word of our Good Shepherd. For replacing Jesus with anything else has eternal consequences

The Good Shepherd Overcomes the False Prophets

While we need to be aware of and test the spirits, we need not fear. For Christ, our Good Shepherd, overcomes all the false prophets. John writes:

⁴You are from God, dear children, and you have overcome the false prophets, because the one in you is greater than the one in the world. ⁵They are from the world. That is why they speak from a worldly perspective and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. The one who knows God listens to us, but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. That is how we can distinguish between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

In the shepherd and sheep image, we are in the flock of Christ. John describes believers as being “from God.” Going back to John’s Gospel, he describes the reason the Son of God became flesh and made his dwelling among us. “To all who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. ¹³They were born, not of blood, or of the desire of

the flesh, or of a husband's will, but born of God.” (John 1:12-13). All with faith in Christ are born of God, are from God, are children of God. As such, we have overcome the false prophets.

Of course, we have no power to overcome the deceptions of the devil, the deceit of the world and the depravity of our sinful nature on our own. Only by being from God and having Christ dwell with us can we overcome. “The one in you is greater than the one in the world.” Jesus dwells with us. God in the flesh has made his dwelling with each believer. The King of kings rules our hearts by faith. Who then, can replace Jesus as ruler of our hearts? For the only Son of God, the eternal Son of God came in the flesh. He offered his flesh on the cross as the only sacrifice able to take away the sin of the world. As Jesus says in the Gospel lesson today, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11).

The false prophets of the world ask you to sacrifice for them. The false prophets promise short term solutions to the temporary problems in life. The sinful nature in us argues that Jesus doesn't know what he's talking about.

But Jesus laid down his life for the sheep. The Son of God offered his life to rescue us from the big problems, from the problems we could never overcome, from the eternal problems – sin and eternal death. Not only did our Good Shepherd sacrifice himself to save us, he then rose from the dead. We listen to our Good Shepherd because he loves us. We listen to him because he overcame sin for us. We listen because he is powerful to overcome death itself. No power in the world can overthrow Christ or remove us from his flock. He purchased our freedom from sin with his own blood. He will not give up his precious, blood-bought people easily. You are of God and will remain of God as long as Christ reigns – forever and ever.

Amen.