

Sermon Draft

Text: Psalm 23

Sermon: Our Shepherd

Jesus did not just die for our sins. Nor did he just rise and leave us to our own devices. Easter is the season for rejoicing in his victory over death and his ongoing work of shepherding his people through this life, to life everlasting. Good Shepherd Sunday, always the Fourth Sunday of Easter in the three-year lectionary, provides a blessed opportunity to tune our ears to hear the voice of our resurrected Lord and follow him.

The shepherd imagery of Psalm 23 is familiar and extensively expounded elsewhere. It may be worth noting, however, that the psalm uses several rich images besides those of sheep and shepherd. After v 4 we leave the pasture. The table in the presence of enemies, the anointing with oil, the cup overflowing, and the house of the Lord all envision different realms. What unites all the metaphors, though, is the caring, providing, and protecting, which remain consistent with the picture of a good shepherd.

No image of the Lord, and his relationship with us, strikes closer to the core of our being than the image we see in today's lessons: the image of the Lord as our Shepherd and us as his sheep. We read it in the Psalm for today: ***"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."*** We hear it in the Second Lesson: ***"For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd."*** (Revelation 7:17) And in our Gospel Jesus tells us, ***"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."*** (John 10:27). We even teach our children to sing "I Am Jesus' Little Lamb."

Why do you suppose this image has such power for us? Perhaps it's because in a world as troubled as ours, we link sheep and shepherds together with peace and quiet. Our psalm says, ***"He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still or quiet waters."*** And when the day has been long and hard, some get to sleep by counting sheep.

Or maybe we like this image so much because of how we think of sheep. I remember we used to have a sheepskin at home, it was so soft to lay on. The wool was soft and clean and fresh. Surely the animal that gave it must be like that: soft and gentle, clean and fresh, without fierce teeth or sharp claws. Jesus, the Lord, is our Shepherd, and we are his sheep.

If only more of us knew how sheep really are, we might feel a bit more sheepish about ourselves! Laura Ingalls Wilder brings that fact home in the book *Farmer Boy*. The chapter called “Sheep Shearing” describes the process of taking the wool from the sheep. The first thing done is to give each sheep a thorough washing.

You see, all that thick, soft wool picks up a lot of dirt as the sheep lives from day to day. What comes to us as clean and soft starts out as filthy and muddy. When the sheep have been scrubbed, they must be sheared immediately, because if they aren’t, they’ll get dirty all over again.

Those who’ve tended sheep know that they have other unpleasant characteristics. Sheep are prone to wander from the flock. The sight of some greener grass catches their attention, and they wander until they find themselves far away. Sheep can also be stubborn, headstrong, willful creatures.

We are God's sheep, God's flock. And just like sheep in the field, we Christians have an amazing ability to pick up dirt from our surroundings. How often we find our thoughts and words reflecting those of our non-Christian neighbors! We may not be able to help passing through the valley of the shadow of death, but when we begin to walk like those who are spiritually dead, that's peril of our own making and we should be very much afraid!

How often we look at ourselves in the light of God's Law, only to be dismayed by the sight of the filth and mess in our life! Instead of luxuriating in the oil the Lord pours over our head and whatever good things he pours into our cup we covet the luxuries of this world, never content, always wanting greener pastures, bigger lawns, houses better appointed than the Lord's (and on a more desirable street!), valuing the praise of others and our friends' envy well above goodness and mercy. Instead of trusting God to vindicate us in the presence of our enemies, we fear them, smear them, speak all kinds of evil against them, and gloat when we see them stumble. Every time we gather for worship in the Divine Service, as soon as the name of God is placed on us, we find we must confess our sins.

God's sheep have a tendency to wander too. Perhaps something hurtful is said to us, maybe by the people of God. Or we experience some horrible, shocking event a sudden death we can't possibly explain in our understanding of a loving God, a rejection by a loved one that doesn't make sense when we've been committed and faithful. Or maybe we catch sight of greener grass just over the next ridge those worldly goods that draw us away, a catchier sounding philosophy or religion. We wander from God's house become angry with him, lose faith in him, lose confidence that his simple Word and Sacrament are the richest table anyone could ever spread before us. The next thing we know, months or even years have gone by, and we find ourselves alone, without him, maybe without the dear ones he's given us.

Isaiah said it well: *"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."* Stubborn? Us? Sadly, yes. When things don't go our way, we sometimes respond by digging in our heels and forcing others to drag us along. Instead of praying, **"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,"** we pray, "My will be done in heaven and on earth—or else!"

We are sheep: dirty, lost, and stubborn. And so serious is our problem that God has taken a radical step to solve it. The Lord, the Shepherd of Israel, took on flesh and became the Lamb. Did you hear the words of John? ***“The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd”*** (Revelation 7:17). Jesus is the Lamb of God. He took away the filth and grime of our sin by washing us in his own pure blood. And when we were lost, without hope and without God in the world, he wandered far from his heavenly home in search of us. His search took him to a lowly virgin in Nazareth, to a humble cave in Bethlehem, and, finally, on a dark and lonely Friday afternoon, to an accursed tree. He conquered our willfulness by yielding his own will to that of the Father even unto death. Freely, willingly, lovingly he offered himself up for us through the Spirit to the Father.

The Shepherd became a lamb. And with his resurrection on the third day, the Lamb has become our Shepherd. He feeds us in the pasture of his Word. He leads us beside the still, deep waters of Baptism: springs of living water, because through this water he gives us life. He satisfies our hunger by giving us the heavenly bread and the cup of life, his own body and blood. Our cup runneth over with eternal blessing because we drink of the cup he pours out for us.

He knows each of us as well as any good shepherd knows his own sheep. And the amazing thing is that he still loves us, still feeds us, still leads and guides us through all the perilous ways of this life. The Shepherd became a Lamb to save us dirty, wandering sheep.

Little by little, as we feed on his love and stay with his flock, he breaks the old willfulness and stubbornness. He makes us his servants, who fear and love and trust in him above all things. He makes us his servants, who learn to give not only our wool but also, if necessary, our own skin for the needs of others.

When we come together each Lord's Day, we come together as his flock. He is here, now, as our Shepherd. He speaks, and we listen. He leads, and we follow. And we have his word that he will keep on leading until that day when we sing his praise in glory and he wipes away every tear from our eyes.

Amen