

Sermon Draft

Text: Psalm 23

Sermon: Our Good Shepherd

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday! Sheep need a shepherd, and the Lord provides. ***“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want”*** (v 1). These are beautiful words that have inspired great hymns and countless stained glass windows! After the cross, it's hard to think of a picture that captures Jesus' ministry to us more than the image of our Good Shepherd. We might think of sheep set against deep green grass, rich blue sky, and white puffy clouds. It's a calming image of an ordered, peaceful life, but that's not the whole story. The fact is there are many dangers for those nearly helpless sheep.

Sheep need shepherds. I don't think I've ever heard of wild sheep. No football team will ever be called the Detroit Lambs. Scattered sheep are doomed. So, the Lord laments in Ezekiel 34:

"They were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts" (Ezekiel 34:5). In Ezekiel, God files his complaint against the kings and priests of Israel. They were to feed, protect, and lead the children of Israel in the Lord's pleasant pastures. But instead they led them into false worship.

They usually didn't completely deny the true God; they allowed the people to worship the true God *and* false gods. They didn't love the Lord or his flock. They loved themselves. They loved fitting in with the spirituality of their day. They loved the income and earthly peace they thought would be theirs by embracing the sins and self-made salvations that surrounded their little land. And the poor sheep were scattered and destroyed.

The Lord God spoke in full, righteous wrath. That's it! "**Behold, I am against the shepherds. . . . No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them**" (34:10). The Lord God proclaimed a most merciful promise: "**Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out**" (34:11). The Lord appointed himself Shepherd for his people. As David taught us to sing, "The *Lord* is my Shepherd!" This beautiful promise is fulfilled in Christ Jesus, the Lord in our flesh who rescues us. Surely, the King of Love my Shepherd is for he lays down his life for the sheep; he leads his sheep; he never forsakes his flock.

First, the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Come down from heaven to save us, Jesus is not a deserter. He doesn't cut and run in order to save his own skin when the fight to save you gets tough. He doesn't let the satanic lion and demon-driven dogs sink their teeth into his sheep.

Jesus put himself into the lion's mouth and let the dogs surround and corner him. He suffered for us. He purposely was betrayed, mocked, scourged, crucified, and damned. He made himself a silent, uncomplaining lamb in our place. As St. Peter confesses: ***"When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed"*** (1 Peter 2:23–24).

Jesus suffered without threatening and was reviled without reviling back, because he was bearing our consequences for wandering away; he got what a lone, isolated, scattered sheep deserved. The Lord had promised through Ezekiel:

"As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness" (Ezekiel 34:12). On the darkest day, a Friday called Good our Good Shepherd delivered us by delivering himself into death. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And the Good Shepherd leads his sheep.

The Good Shepherd calls his sheep and they follow his voice. Of course, a dead shepherd doesn't help his sheep for long. Soon the wolves' stomachs are empty. But our Good Shepherd not only lays down his life, but he takes it up again. He rises from the dead to lead us.

Sheep have impeccable hearing. Multiple flocks can be merged together at night and then separated in the morning, simply by the shepherds calling. This is what Jesus taught in John 10, speaking of himself as the Shepherd:

"The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice"

(John 10:3–4).

Dearly beloved in the Lord, Jesus leads us by his voice. He first tenderly taught us to recognize his voice at our Baptism; through the Word and blessed Sacrament of the Altar, he continues to teach us and lead us through this sinful world with his voice.

But we must learn to distinguish his voice—the Word of Holy Scripture—from the cacophony of loud and alluring voices of our day. His voice calls us to repentance, to the anointing of our head with the oil of Holy Baptism, to feed on the lush pastures of his Word and at the Table of his life-giving flesh and blood spread before us even while Satan, sin, and death surround.

Notice in Psalm 23 that all the important actions happen by the Shepherd's work, not ours. *He* makes me lie down in green pastures; *he* leads; *he* restores; *he* leads.

But watch out, for there are wolves and thieves aplenty who would teach us that Holy Baptism is our work, instead of God's—something we do to show ourself to be a sheep rather than the brand the Good Shepherd puts on us to mark us as his. As if a sheep could brand itself!

There are those who want to teach that the Lord's Supper is not the table of the Good Shepherd's body and blood, but a symbolic supper by which we think fondly on what Jesus did for us. As if a sheep could feed itself!

There are those who would turn us inward to believing, to our piety, to our feelings, to our works, to our self, and away from Jesus and his blood-bought gifts. As if a sheep could shepherd itself!

There are those who tell us that receiving Jesus' work isn't enough to save. We must have enough love and do enough good to make it to heaven. As if a sheep could defeat the lion itself!

There are those who say that they can give us success, popularity, wealth, and health if we just say their prayer repeatedly or follow their rules. As if a sheep can turn himself into a sleek and successful sheep!

Flee from them and do not follow them, Christ says. Martin Luther wrote, **“If you wish, therefore, to be richly supplied in both body and soul, then above all give careful attention to the voice of this Shepherd, listen to his words, let him feed, direct, lead, protect, and comfort you. That is: hold fast to his Word, hear and learn it gladly, for then you will be well supplied in both body and soul”**

(AE 12:157). The Good Shepherd leads us and the Good Shepherd never forsakes his flock.

David, who faced death many times, calls us to pray: "**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me**" (v 4).

There are times when we might feel abandoned. Why would a caring shepherd lead me through the valley of the shadow of death? Why would the death of a dear one cast a shadow over me? Why does my own death loom before me as a dark cloud? Is it that the Good Shepherd has left me? Is it because of my sin or my failure?

No, he is not punishing us. No, he has not failed to care for us. "**I will fear no evil, for you are with me**" (v 4). Jesus is with us in death. He went through it first for us to open the way to life. Jesus is with us in mourning. He wept at Lazarus's tomb. Jesus is our Good Shepherd, who comforts us. He sends goodness and mercy to nip joyfully at our heels. He leads us right into his house here today and will keep us who follow him in his house forever.

Sheep that are separated from the flock are easy pickings for the poachers. Christians don't go it alone—that would be going against the very voice of the Good Shepherd. Experience teaches that people without a congregation tend to believe in a little bit of everything, and so in truth wind up believing in nothing at all. Sheep who don't learn the voice of their Shepherd will soon follow any voice. Outside the Church, it's cold and deadly—there's no forgiveness, no life there.

But here in the Lord's congregation, the Lord restores the joy of salvation to our soul; the Lord brings us back rejoicing; the Lord binds up our wounds; the Lord guides us in his righteous way; the Lord is with us and comforts us even under the dark shadows of death. Because of our Good Shepherd's boundless, selfless love, received by the faith he supplies, surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen