

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

THE GOOD SHEPHERD LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE FOR THE SHEEP
John 10:11-18; Easter 4B; April 20-21, 2024

[Jesus said:] **“I AM the Good Shepherd. The Good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep... and takes it up again.”**

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!**

The Good Shepherd Sunday Gospel from John 10 points us back to Jesus’ death on the cross: **“The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”** It also points us forward to His resurrection from the dead, **“I lay down My life that I may also take it up again.”** Good Shepherd Sunday is about Jesus dying and rising so we may be His sheep. **“I AM the Good Shepherd,”** Jesus says.

1. I AM.

When John quotes Jesus saying, **“I AM,”** this is not just the first person singular of the verb “to be,” “is.” This is Jesus identifying Himself as the LORD God of the Old Testament. Jesus is God, who created all things in the beginning by His Word. Jesus is the LORD who called Abraham to be blessed and a blessing to all nations by the Seed of the promise. Jesus is the LORD who called Moses from the burning bush to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt. He identified Himself then with His personal name, the LORD, which sounds something like *Yahweh* in Hebrew. This is the name by which God blesses His people, as we hear each week at the end of the Divine Service (Nu 6:24-26):

**The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.**

We confessed Jesus to be God the LORD when we sang the 23rd Psalm: **The LORD is my Shepherd.** That Jesus is the LORD with the Father and the Holy Spirit, makes all the difference in the world for us since it is God Himself who laid down His life for the sheep as the Good Shepherd. So, when we hear Jesus saying, **“I AM,”** we are hearing the voice of God Himself speaking to us. We will confess this faith in Jesus a little later in the Nicene Creed: **“And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God”** (Nicene Creed, 2nd Art.).

2. The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life For the Sheep... and takes it up again.

Jesus does this as the Son of God the Father and the Owner of the sheep. **I AM the Good Shepherd. I know My own [sheep].** By definition, a shepherd is someone who has sheep, and this is true of the Good Shepherd. Jesus is not just a “hireling,” someone paid to watch sheep belonging someone else, but the Son of the Father who has given Him these sheep to shepherd.

That Jesus **lays down His life for the sheep** is significant for us. It is the language of atonement, sacrifice for the sake of another, that is, Jesus sacrificed for us. After John baptized Jesus, he pointed to Him and proclaimed, **“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”** The Good Shepherd comes as God’s Lamb. Jesus is both Shepherd and Lamb, the great High Priest offering up the sacrifice for the sake of the people and the Sacrifice Himself on the altar of the cross. We sing in the Hymn of Praise this time of year: *“Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood sets us free to be people of God”* (LSB DS1: This Is the Feast).

One of my favorite hymns is, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is” (LSB 709), based on the 23rd Psalm and Jesus’ parable of the Lost Sheep sought in love and found by the Good Shepherd. The hymn describes how Jesus, *“on His shoulder gently laid And home rejoicing brought me”* (St. 3). We have a beautiful stained-glass window on the south wall of our church building depicting Jesus as our Good Shepherd tending sheep and carrying a lamb in His arms. Our Good Shepherd finds us when lost, carries us in His arms or on His shoulders, and brings us home to dwell in His house forever. That is an image we treasure and hold onto in faith.

What we shouldn’t forget is that almost directly opposite the Good Shepherd window is a north window where Jesus is shown dying on the cross. **The Good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.** For us to be gently laid on His shoulders and carried home, the wood of the cross first had to be laid brutally on His shoulders and carried to the place of His death. Jesus, the Lamb of God, was sacrificed for the sins of the world, my sins and your sins. To take away the sins of the sheep, the Good Shepherd had to take up the cross.

Jesus, the Owner, knows His sheep. **“I am the Good Shepherd. I know My own [sheep].”** It is not in some vague, theoretical sense that Jesus knows sheep, but as the One who became the Lamb. The great I AM/LORD God Himself, whose Father knows the Son and Son His Father, became man, born of the virgin Mary. The Good Shepherd knows us as one of us, fully man, though without sin. Taking the sin of the wandering sheep, our sin, on Himself, He laid down His life for the sheep as the Lamb of God.

We need to keep this in mind whenever we imagine ourselves as cute and cuddly little lambs, so worthy of His love. What Isaiah said about us and Jesus is true: **All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth** (53:6-7). That the Good Shepherd **knows His own** sheep means He knows our sins because He bore them on the cross in our place. And by this sacrifice He has redeemed us from our sin, from death, and from the power of the devil. We are bought and paid for, “purchased and won,” by the “holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death” of our Good Shepherd who is also the Lamb of God.

3. The Sheep of the Good Shepherd.

We have already heard, in general, that we sinful humans are the sheep Jesus died and rose for. More specifically, Jesus notes that His sheep include more than just His Jewish disciples then who were with Him when He spoke these words, described as **this fold**. The **one flock** of the **one Shepherd** includes **other sheep that are not of this fold**. Jesus is referring to Gentile (non-Jewish) believers like us who are brought into the Church by faith in Jesus as our Good Shepherd. Jesus laid down His life on the cross to save all the people of the world and make them sheep of His fold.

A “flock” is a gathering together of sheep around a shepherd. The word Jesus used for “flock” is based on the word “shepherd.” To be a member of the flock means to be with the shepherd.

How does Jesus describe His flock? **“They (the sheep of the flock) will listen to My voice.”** Those who are not sheep of the Good Shepherd’s flock will not listen to His voice. The sheep of His flock will gather in the presence of the Good Shepherd to listen to His Word and be fed and nourished with what they need to live and thrive. Those who are not of His flock will go off wherever they want outside of the range of the hearing of His Word where they will listen to other words, be fed on whatever they want, not what He wants for them, and suffer the consequences of all sheep not in His flock.

Martin Luther, in a very simple way, describes how to determine whether someone is a member of the true Church, Jesus’ flock, or not a member of the Church. “Thank God, a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (Smalcald Articles, III, XII.2). The majority of our own congregational members, apparently, disagree with this definition of the Church. This would put them outside the Lutheran Church because the Lutheran Confessions teach this as the right understanding of the Third Article of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds on “the holy Christian Church.”

The Church is more than just spiritual; it is also a physical body of human believers gathered in the presence of their physical Good Shepherd to hear His Word and eat and drink His body and blood. God the Holy Spirit gathers Christians into Christ’s flock. A Christian congregation is made up of people who “congregate,” from the Latin word that means to “collect into a flock.” Having your name on the membership rolls of this congregation, or any other congregation for that matter, does not save anyone if he or she refuses to believe Jesus’ Word that they must gather together with the other sheep to listen to His voice and receive His body and blood.

To refuse to congregate with other Christians around Christ’s Holy Word and Sacrament is a great sin that must be repented. There is forgiveness from the Good Shepherd for this sin, but it is received only by those who want to hear His voice within the flock gathered around their Shepherd. If you believe in Jesus, you want to hear His voice that calls you to repent of your sin and return to the flock to be forgiven. If you won’t do that, you are not a Christian.

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

Jesus says, **“I AM the Good Shepherd. The Good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep...and He takes it up again.”** Jesus, the LORD God Himself, became man; the Shepherd and Owner of the sheep became the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the sheep by sacrificing Himself, dying and rising to save His sheep from sin and death and give them life forever. “...that we may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom.” That we **“shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”** Amen.