

THE GOOD SHEPHERD AND HIS SHEEP  
John 10:11-16; Easter 3; April 17-18, 2021

**P** Alleluia! Christ is risen!

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

I grew up hearing my pastors preach on “Good Shepherd Sunday” about how sheep are basically defenseless against predators like wolves or coyotes and so always need a shepherd to protect them. This view was shattered when I spent a school year in South Australia as a seminary exchange student and went hiking in the “Out Back” wilderness. Out in the wilds of Australia you see kangaroos and wallabies hopping around, but you also see sheep roaming around without a shepherd in sight, and those sheep looked perfectly satisfied and unafraid. How can they live without a shepherd to lead and protect them? The answer to that is the longest continuous fence in the world. It is over 3,000 miles long and commonly called the “dingo fence” since it keeps out the only natural predator of sheep in Australia. The dingo, a wild dog, is prevented by this fence from entering the sheep raising parts of the country. Sheep roam freely in Australia until they need to be rounded up for sheering or slaughter.

That is completely different from Jesus’ words in John ten about Him being our Good Shepherd and we being His sheep. The situation Jesus describes is one that is dangerous for sheep. There are wolves around us in this world that seek to snatch us in their jaws to kill us and scatter us away from the flock and the protection of the Shepherd. For us to survive the attack of the wolf, the Shepherd must die, something the hired hand is unwilling to do since he does not own the sheep. The Good Shepherd lays down His live for His sheep, the description of Jesus dying on the cross for us.

The world we live in could not be more different from that of sheep in Australia, but we actually have it better than those sheep. They think their life of freedom to wander is great, until they are rounded up to be sheered or slaughtered. Even though we have wolves out to get us, we have the loving Good Shepherd to save us from them, even though it cost Him His life. In fact, the reason why God’s Son needed to come as our Good Shepherd is because sinful humans imagine that their lives are better off without God and put themselves in peril of death.

Isaiah describes us this way in chapter 53. **All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way** (53:6a). It is the nature of sinners to think that they will have a better life apart from God. People who reject their need for God often seem Him as an oppressive law-giver, preventing them from having the freedom to do as they want, the freedom to be who they want, the freedom to have freedom, fun, and self-fulfillment. Their understanding of God is as a taker not a giver. The sad truth is that most people who reject God have a wrong understanding of who He is and what He wants. The false god who is rejected is not the true God who loves them so much that He gives laws for their own good and saves them from the lawlessness that they want to cling to.

This lawlessness is reflected in our society today when people think that they have the right to use lawlessness to settle their personal or society's grievances. Violence against others and the institutions of government is justified as a "good." Lawbreakers are held up as victims-heroes and those entrusted with our protection are vilified as evil perpetrators. As we see the God-created good institution of the marriage of a man and woman with children as the definition of family and the foundation of all our society's institutions undermined and denigrated, it is not surprising to see our society crumbling. When people sinfully abandon God's will for them and seek their own way apart from Him, we should expect to see chaos and violence seeking to overthrow the order of God's creation that is for our own good.

And, in case we want to blame "them" out there for all our problems, God's Word slams that door in our face: **All we [not only 'them'] like sheep have gone astray; we [with "them"] have turned—every one—to his own way.** If we in the Church somehow imagine that we no longer need saving from our sins, we make God a liar. The devil and hell are real, not fairytales made up to scare us into obedience. The world is a dangerous place, full of trouble and hardship. And within our hearts is our own sinfulness that wants to be enticed to wander from God, to be sheep without a shepherd, to be our own gods. So when we look at the trouble around us, we need to begin by confessing that this begins with us. Jesus came because all of us are sinners. **And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all** (53:6b).

Jesus said, **“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”** Why God was willing to sacrifice His own Son to save a world of wandering, faithless, rebellious, and sinful sheep surpasses understanding, but it is the definition of God’s love for us. When people complain that they don’t want to be Christians because the Church is all about having to follow rules, they show that they don’t know the true God who sacrificed all for their sake. “For our salvation” God’s Son “came down from heaven and was incarnate,” became true man, and “was crucified also for us.”

### **The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.**

*The King of love my Shepherd is ...*

*Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,  
But yet in love He sought me,  
And on His shoulder gently laid  
And home rejoicing brought me (LSB 709.1, 3).*

What a beautiful paraphrase of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm! God was not willing to let His sheep wander off into death and destruction, but sent His Son to seek us out and bring us back into the fold of the Church.

It is no burden on us being sheep of the Good Shepherd. Being brought into the fold of the Church as Christians is a great gift and blessing to us. Jesus describes it this way: **I know My own and My own know Me... and they will listen to Me.**

There are no anonymous Christians in the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd. God calls us all by name, even giving us His own name in Holy Baptism as His children. By that name He forgives all our sins by the cleansing blood of Jesus. And our God is not anonymous to us. We call Him by name because we know Him as our Good Shepherd. We recognize His voice as the very One who laid down His life for us, and took it up again to lead us to life everlasting with Him.

When Martin Luther was asked to explain what it means to be a Christian in the Church, he drew on our Gospel for today. “A seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (SA III, XII).

Jesus' sheep will listen to Him speak His Word to them. They will hear Him call them to repentance for their sins. They will hear Him forgive them in His name. They will hear Him as He gives them what He laid down on the cross for them, His body and blood to eat and drink, "With food celestial feedeth" (709.2), as the hymn puts.

God has not left us as wild sheep to wander this world until it is time to round us up to fleece us and slaughter us. He has brought us into His flock for us to be His own, and for Him to be our Good Shepherd. He has brought us into His flock to save us from the wolf, and to save us from ourselves and our wandering. Our Good Shepherd laid down His life for us and took it up again so we can be His little lambs who will hear His voice now and forever.

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow [us] all the days of [our lives,] and [we] shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

Amen.

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

[Nicene Creed; Prayers; Offertory]