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THE PERFECT SHEPHERD WITH PERFECT SHEEP
Ez. 34:11-16, Jn 10:11-18, 27-30; Arlan Reiter; Sept. 23, 2024

Arlan was a man who liked order. He liked things in their proper places, neat and clean, and things done correctly. He had these expectations not just of others, but first of all for himself. We saw this in how he dressed for church: typically in a suit and tie, though he could be more casual during the summer months. His daughters recalled that going to church meant always wearing a dress on Communion Sundays. I think I recall a conversation with him about church ushers' attire: they should wear suits and ties and, if they did not own a suit, maybe suit jackets in various sizes could be kept at church for them to put on when they were on duty.

When visiting Arlan at home, everything was as it should be. He kept the yard mown and trimmed; he had standards for himself he kept. He was proud of the grandfather clocks he put together and finished. It is clear that his goal was perfection. There's a saying: "If something is to be done, it should be done right."

That made it hard for him when his body started failing him. When he received treatment for cancer, he had to rely on doctors and treatments that helped in ways yet caused more problems for him. When the treatments were finished there were side-effects, and he had less control over his body. When his last cancer diagnosis was received, it became clear to him that treatment would not make things right for him. He wanted to remain on this earth because he still had family and friends to care for, but it just wouldn't be. Perfection in a sinful, broken, dying world is impossible to attain – or is it?

In the devotion I had with Sharon, Stephanie and Pam right after Arlan died, I referred to the words of today's Epistle from First Timothy four. Arlan had **fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith**. God promises to Christians who die in the faith that He will award to them a **crown of righteousness**.

Righteousness is a kind of perfection. Those who are righteous are holy and without sin, they are innocent of anything wrong and can stand before God in His glory without any shame.

Was Arlan righteous and holy in himself? Was Arlan perfect in all that he said and did? The answer is, No. If he were perfect, he would not have gotten sick and died. Death is the result of imperfection. Death is the enemy of life; death destroys life. Those who think that death is just a natural process by which the world is evolving are deluding themselves. They deny that there is a God in heaven who created everything in this world “good,” even “very good.” Until sin and death are destroyed and overcome, nothing in creation can be perfect. God wants everything perfect for us, so He took on our imperfection.

The 23rd Psalm describes how God wants us to live in His perfection, which means being led **through the valley of the shadow of death to dwell in the house of the LORD forever**. The psalm acknowledges that we sheep are in an imperfect world and carry around in ourselves death itself because of our sin, but the LORD is our Shepherd who leads us to live in His perfection. The Old Testament Reading from Ezekiel 34 describes imperfect sheep in a need of a Shepherd and the Gospel from John ten describes God’s perfect Shepherd in Jesus.

Arlan, when he was young, was given some lambs to raise. It was not clear who he received them from, maybe the local banker in Truman, but it was Arlan’s responsibility to take care of and raise those lambs. One issue with sheep is that they need constant watching. Arlan became their shepherd, and I’m sure that he did a great job in raising those sheep.

Ezekiel 34 describes God’s people when without a faithful shepherd being scatted, lost, strayed, injured and weak in their sin and unbelief. God’s sheep are the opposite of perfect, so the Lord GOD promised to be their Shepherd, seeking the lost and straying, binding up the wounds of the injured, and strengthening the weak.

How does God do this? He sent His own Son into human flesh as our Shepherd-Savior. Our Good Shepherd became one of the sheep. And the Lamb of God was sacrificed for the sake of the sheep. The Good Shepherd-Lamb laid down His life on the cross and died for the sheep to save us from all that seeks to scatter and destroy the flock. And then Jesus took up His life and rose from the dead.

Arlan's sheep relied on him for food and protection. In a similar way he relied on Jesus his Good shepherd. He realized that he was not perfect before God and there was nothing he could do to achieve that perfection. There are no perfect sheep in God's flock, except the Lamb of God. The Good Friday Old Testament Reading from Isaiah 52-53 makes this clear.

**All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on Him (Jesus, the Lamb of God)
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).

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, did all this for us.

Arlan was such a sheep of the Good Shepherd as described by Jesus. **“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me”** (Jn 10:27). He was called by name in Holy Baptism, known by God as His own lamb, and Arlan grew up recognizing the voice of his Good Shepherd. Together with Sharon, he raised his family to share in the God's blessings. He faithfully heard the voice of Jesus in church, led to the **green pastures** and fed at the Lord's Table here.

He realized that getting dressed up to receive Christ's body and blood at the Lord's Supper did not reflect perfection in him or others, or that ushers wearing suits added anything to the gifts received here, but he had a good sense of awe for who God is and what it means to come into God's gracious presence: O Lord my God...How great Thou art! (*LWB* 801.1).

When Arlan found out he had terminal cancer, it was an assault on his pursuit of perfection. He realized that the options for treatment at that point were basically pointless. He did not show any fear at his approaching death, but many times he expressed he was letting down his family, failing to be here to care for Sharon and the rest of you. He wasn't living up to his own standards.

Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, **“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”** (Mt 5:48). God demands that His sheep be perfect, but we are anything but perfect, no matter how much we might try. How then can we be saved?

When God promised in Ezekiel 34 to be the Shepherd of His people, a promise He kept in Jesus Christ, the Reading concludes with God saying, **“I will feed them [My sheep] in justice”** (34:16). All of us will one day stand before the righteous Judge, and God’s standard is perfection, to be righteous and holy before Him. Will God’s justice demand our condemnation? God’s justice has been satisfied in Jesus Christ, of whom Isaiah prophesied:

**He was pierced for our transgressions;
He was crushed for our iniquities;
upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with His wounds we are healed** (53:5).

Facing his coming death, Arlan confessed his faith in Jesus and the hope he had. It was true of him what St. Paul said of himself. **The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.**

By faith in Jesus his perfect Shepherd, and having been credited with God’s own righteous, Arlan has been awarded the crown of righteousness as a perfect sheep of His perfect Shepherd. Amen.