

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Easter 4B
April 25, 2021
John 10:11-18

The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep.” (John 10:11, 14, 15 ESV)

Dearly beloved lambs of the Good Shepherd,

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen again! Alleluia!]

Of all the images of Jesus presented in the Bible, perhaps none is as dear to us as that of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Perhaps that’s because we remember with fondness learning to sing “I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb.” When we learned that song as children, we had a lot less worries and stress, cares and concerns than we do today because someone was taking care of us and providing what we needed. In addition, many Lutheran homes, schools, and churches had a picture of Jesus carrying or holding a lamb. And as we looked at that picture, we were taught to think of ourselves as the lamb in Jesus’ arms or across His shoulders.

And this was good because we so desperately need a Good Shepherd. You see, sheep cannot take care of themselves. They depend on their shepherd to lead them to green pastures and beside still waters. They depend on their shepherd to protect them and to keep them safe from many dangers. Without a shepherd, sheep are doomed because they cannot protect themselves. Their enemies will find them easy pickings, especially if the sheep should wander off, as they tend to do when left to themselves.

But Jesus is not talking about sheep as sheep. He’s talking about people, His people, those who believe in Him and follow Him. Thus, in the Old Testament, we hear of God providing shepherds for His sheep. When the children of Israel were about to enter the Promised Land and Moses was about to die, he voiced his concern for the people, “Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them and go in before them, who may lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep which have no shepherd” (Num 27:15-17). And God appointed Joshua to be that shepherd.

Later in their history, God took a shepherd of real sheep and made him the shepherd over His people Israel. Saul and his sons had died or been killed. “Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and spoke, saying, ‘Indeed we are your bone and your flesh. Also, in time past, when Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel out and brought them in; and the

Lord said to you, 'You shall shepherd My people Israel, and be ruler over Israel'" (2 Sam. 5:1-2). So David became the shepherd over the flock of Israel.

Yet, other shepherds – the kings, priests, and false prophets – didn't do such a good job. In Ezekiel 34 God chastises the leaders of His people because they did not feed and care for the flock, but rather used and abused the sheep, the people, for their own advantage. The result was that the people were scattered, lost, and easy prey for those who would do them harm (Ezek. 34:1-6).

You see, those false shepherds were nothing but hirelings. They didn't care at all for the sheep, but only for themselves. Rather than serve the flock, they thought the flock should serve them. How unlike Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who says of Himself, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). The false shepherds did not feed God's sheep with God's Word. They did not speak the truth. They often spoke of peace when there was no peace (Jer. 6:14). They often called what is good evil and what is evil good. They did not preach God's Word, but their own. Indeed, they often led the people astray to worship false gods. These hirelings were as much a danger to the flock as were the wolves, false teachers of other gods. Furthermore, when danger came, they left the sheep to fend for themselves. They did not protect the sheep. They showed themselves not to be shepherds at all, but rather another predator. Thus Jesus warns, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15). And as a result of their unfaithfulness, God announced that for the sake of the sheep He was firing those false shepherds because they did not feed His flock. (Ezek. 34:7-10).

But God didn't just leave it at that. Listen to His Word:

'For thus says the Lord God: "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down," says the Lord God. "I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment" (Ezek. 34:11-16).

Did you hear that? God promised that He Himself would be Shepherd to His sheep. He Himself would seek after those who were lost. He Himself would feed His sheep. He Himself would bind up the broken and wounded. He Himself would strengthen the sick. Yet, there's more. Not only will this Divine Shepherd gather His sheep and heal them, He will also guard them from each other. You see, some sheep push other sheep out of the way and hurt them. "Therefore thus says the Lord God to them: 'Behold, I Myself will judge between the fat and the lean sheep.

Because you have pushed with side and shoulder, butted all the weak ones with your horns, and scattered them abroad, therefore I will save My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep” (Ezek. 34:20-22).

More than that, God promises, “I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them – My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd.” (Ezek. 34:23). And Jesus is that Shepherd God had promised to send. Jesus is the Good Shepherd in that He willingly laid down His life for the sheep so they might live. Yes, Jesus came “to serve and give His life a ransom for many.” “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” (Isaiah 53:6). You see, Jesus died in our place, taking our place under God’s wrath over sin so we wouldn’t have to. He died so His sheep might live. That’s the absurdity of the Gospel. No other shepherd could do that. For when any other shepherd dies, the wolves have free reign. But when Jesus died, He also rose again. Thus, He continues to be the Good Shepherd over His flock and protects us from sin, death, and the devil.

And He appoints under-shepherds, His pastors, to continue to serve and protect His flock. Even though they too are wretched sinners and poor imitations of the Good Shepherd, they desire to proclaim God’s Word in its truth and purity, and to administer the Sacraments as instituted by Christ. They desire nothing more than to lead their sheep into green pastures and beside still waters as they faithfully speak what God has given them to speak, and not their own opinions. They warn the flock of the dangers of false shepherds and the devil himself. They protect the flock by preaching and teaching the fullness of God’s Word - both Law and Gospel. They feed the flock with the forgiveness of sins earned by Christ. They Baptize in the name of the Good Shepherd. They absolve the penitent. They feed the flock with the Body and Blood of the Good Shepherd Himself. In short, faithful under-shepherds, pastors, point the flock to the Good Shepherd, the Good Pastor, and all that He has done for them. They continually point the sheep to Christ’s sacrificial death in their place so they need not fear death and the devil.

Yes, my dear sheep, Jesus is *the* Good Shepherd, the Good Pastor. He laid down His life for the sheep, for you. More than that, He has taken it up again. And because He died for you, in your place, you will not die, at least not eternally. For because He has also taken up His life, because He is risen from the dead, You too shall rise to eternal life. He lives to Shepherd you into heavenly pastures. God grant that you repent and rest secure in His arms, now and forever.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen again! Alleluia!] Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener