

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Pentecost 9B - Proper 11B
July 21, 2024
Mark 6:30-44

The Shepherd Who Feeds in Green Pastures

When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. (Mark 6:34 ESV)

In the Name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd and only Savior of the world.

Throughout the Bible, God describes His people as sheep, His flock. He loves them and tenderly cares for them, leading them to green pastures and beside the still waters (Ps. 23:2) and protecting them from every danger and harm. He gives them leaders through whom He works to provide that care, especially in leading them on the way to the fulfillment of God's promises of righteousness and life.

So when the disciples returned from their assignment and reported "all that they had done and taught," (Mark 6:30), there was such a crowd that they couldn't even eat. They needed rest, and, as the Good Shepherd He is, Jesus was going to take them "to a desolate place and rest a while." (Mark 6:31). Yet, when they arrived, there was a crowd waiting for them. And Jesus had compassion on them because "they were like sheep without a shepherd." By adding that detail, Mark sets the stage for the Psalm 23 imagery in this miracle.

Now, Psalm 23 is probably the best-known psalm in God's Bible, and countless numbers of God's people have dearly loved this psalm for thousands of years.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
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.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

So as we hear today's Gospel, we can't help but have the picture of that Psalm in mind.

Jesus shows Himself to be the Good Shepherd who has compassion on these people. And thus He give them what they need the most. "He began to teach them many things." Exactly what He taught them we're not told. But we can be sure that it included a call to repentance and to faith in Him as their Savior. Therefore, we too should give attention to hearing Jesus' Words. For when you are hearing Jesus' Words, you are at the same time receiving the miracle of Jesus' compassion.

And as the hour was late and the disciples asked the Jesus to send the crowd away to buy something to eat, Jesus tells them to give them something to eat. These who had just returned from preaching and casting out demons didn't know how they could do that. So they asked if they should go buy some bread. Jesus asks them what they have. They answer, "Five loaves and two fish." That would be enough.

Jesus "commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass," thus emphasizing the green grass, which brings Psalm 23 to mind for you, where the Lord "makes me lie down in green pastures" (23:2).

Furthermore, Jesus wanted the people "to sit down in groups," "so they sat down in groups, by hundreds and fifties." This detail paints a picture of little flocks of people spread out around the meadow, in the very same way that little flocks of God's Christians gather together each week in their small congregations that have spread out, here and there throughout the world.

As Mark describes the distribution of the bread, he uses an on-going verb when he states that Jesus "gave [the loaves] to the disciples to set before the people" (imperfect). Mark's verb describes this miraculous meal as taking a while. There were successive distributions to the various little flocks of sheep that had gathered together in their groups on the green grass. By using this on-going verb, Mark makes it sound as though the people ate again and again until they "all ate and were satisfied"—just as we Christians likewise gather again and again here at our Holy Communion until that great day when we shall finally have our full in the fully revealed Kingdom of Heaven.

Hearing this Gospel and seeing its connection to Psalm 23, we can draw some very specific conclusions about your life in the Church.

Firstly, Jesus is your Good Shepherd because He sees you, sees your condition, and He feels great compassion for you. You don't need personally and inwardly to feel "harassed and

helpless” in your life. You certainly might feel that way—and plenty of Christians do—but then again, you might not. You might feel just fine, and that is fine. Your feelings about your personal situation—feeling harassed and helpless—are not the main point of Jesus’ compassion for you. Jesus has compassion for you because of what He Himself can see concerning you, and Jesus sees things in you and in me that we probably cannot see within ourselves. According to Mark’s Gospel, all people are very much “sheep without a shepherd” until Jesus makes them part of His flock. Were it not for our Lord Jesus, we would still be “sheep without a shepherd,” even though we might not necessarily feel harassed and helpless on account of the events of our lives.

Secondly, Jesus shepherds you—that is to say, Jesus feeds and protects you as a Shepherd would feed and protect His sheep—by means of His powerful and miracle-producing Word. That’s why He taught them many things, and does the same for us. Jesus “makes [you] to lie down in green pastures” and “restores your soul” in a very particular way: Jesus your Good Shepherd does these things for you by speaking His Words to you here in worship. Furthermore, a picture of Psalm 23 or our Good Shepherd should continually remind us of the importance of our regular worship, our gathering here, where Jesus teaches us many things and miraculously feeds us His life-sustaining meal.

Thirdly, with Psalm 23 in mind, we should know that God’s Holy Communion IS the place where your Good Shepherd prepares a table for you in the presence of your enemies and the place where your cup overflows. This sanctuary is the green pasture where your God restores your soul, forgiving you your sins and assuring you of your resurrection victory in Christ. The path of righteousness in which Jesus leads you is the path that faithfully takes you through these doors and back again every week.

Finally, think of your Sunday morning worship, week after week, as one on-going miracle of nourishment that will not end until we all have our fill. Stated another way, think of worship not as something that begins and ends on a Sunday morning, but as something that continues for all the days of your life—until we all receive our fill in the resurrection on the Last Day.

According to today’s Gospel, each Sunday liturgy is yet another distribution of one and the same miracle, in which Jesus teaches His gathered sheep many things, fills them with good things, and promises that they each shall indeed “dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”
Amen.

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

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