

John 10.11-16
Misericordias domini (3rd Sunday of Easter)
15 April 2018
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Hallelujah! +

Fellow redeemed: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Hallelujah! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!**

The Scriptures to which we turn our attention today are all the lessons for today, but especially these words of Jesus: "I AM the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."

Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.

A few years ago I figured something out that I never knew.

Feasts like Christmas and Easter and Pentecost, of course, must always be celebrated. They're part of the basic catechesis of the Church. You can't be a Christian if Christ didn't come into the flesh. You can't be a Christian if He wasn't crucified and didn't rise again on the Third Day, on Easter. And you can't be a Christian if the risen and ascended Jesus didn't pour out the Holy Spirit on all flesh. And bring the life-giving Spirit through Word and Sacrament to those who are dead in their trespasses and sins.

But get this—and this is what I figured out. There's a whole nother set of Sundays that can't be bumped, either. And they all have Latin name. This Sunday has come affectionately to be know as "Good Shepherd Sunday."

But that's not its proper name. Its proper name is *Misericordias domini*—"The mercies and goodness of the Lord." Words taken from the introit. And that's a signal to the preacher—and the congregation—that this isn't just any old Sunday, but a Sunday that comes with a message that's basic and fundamental to Christian teaching, faith, and life.

So the question is: just what is that fundamental teaching that's so important to Christian teaching and faith and life?

Well, it's this: the Lord *is* good. But rarely in the way you expect.

And we call that the theology of the cross.

Look. It's the Easter season. We just started this homily with the Easter acclamation, Hallelujah! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

But the first words out of Jesus' mouth aren't, "I AM the Good Shepherd. I rise on the Third Day." Instead, they're "I AM the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."

The Good Shepherd is good. But not in the way you expect. God is good. But not in the way you expect. What you'd expect of a good shepherd would be something like this: "I AM the Good Shepherd. I come prepared with bow, arrow, and spear. And when the lions and wolves come, I go into action. I shoot and stab. And save the sheep."

But this is not how the Good Shepherd is good. Instead, He lays down His life for the flock.

Why? Why is this so?

Because your enemies aren't lions and wolves. The fight that the Good Shepherd takes up isn't against fangs and jaws and swiping paws. It's against sin and death. *Your* sin and death.

Because while He is good, you were not. And while He is good, and in His goodness has even called you into His one flock, the flock of the holy Christian Church, through your Baptism, even so still: the good that you would, that do you not do, and the evil that you would not, that's what you do.

Your sharp, destructive tongue. It is no good.

Your prideful boasting and gloating. It is no good.

Your vengefulness. It is no good.

Your grass-is-greener-on-the-other-side coveting. It is no good.

Your arrogant defense of self. It is no good.

And that is your enemy. Your sin. And your death.

But in His goodness, the Good Shepherd enters this world that is not good. And what is yours He makes His. For only in this way can such an enemy be defeated. What you cannot give up, He takes from you. What you cannot help doing, He assumes responsibility for.

But for all of that there's a price to be paid. Your sins are your death. And your sins are the death of the Son of God. The Good Shepherd. Who is good in the way you least expect it. If you want to define the *miseri cordias domini*, the goodnesses and mercies of the Lord, you can define it no other way than this: that the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. For you. For apart from *that* goodness, there are no goodnesses of the Lord. Apart from that kind of shepherd, you have no *Good* Shepherd.

But this leads us right into the world of the theology of the cross, where what is good is rarely what we expect. Where what we call evil, the Good Shepherd calls good. [If you have been redeemed by the Cross, you will be transformed to the Cross.]

And this is the catechesis that's so important—the reason why this Sunday has a Latin name and *can't* be moved or bumped or ignored.

Because the life of a Christian, fellow-redeemed, is a life a suffering. Let me say that again. The life of a Christian is a life of suffering. When you were baptized, the pastor didn't say, "Receive the sign of the empty tomb both upon the forehead and upon the breast," but "Receive the sign of the holy cross, both

upon the forehead and upon the breast, to mark you as one redeemed...by Christ the Crucified." By blood. By the blood of the Son of God. Signed with the Cross, you live under the cross. Which is to say, you bear a cross. And suffering.

But how do we get here from there? How do we get from "Christ suffered and died for me" to "I must also suffer"?

It's because the life of the Cross prepares you for the life of the empty tomb. Redeemed by Christ, you must follow in His steps. That's a law of Christianity as firm as any law of nature, like gravity. Whatever you take to the top of a building and drop must fall. And whatever Christ redeemed and made His own to enjoy everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness must suffer. Because in a sinful world you are becoming what you will be.

And so what we call evil God calls good. And what we call good God calls evil.

Good I call it to abuse and insult and mock you when you do that to me.

Good I call it to mistreat when mistreated.

Good I call it to fight back for myself when I suffer.

Good I call it to brag about myself and get my own way.

Good I call it to throw my weight around—for my own benefit.

Good I call it to lose my cool and snap everyone into line when things aren't going my way.

Good I call it to do whatever the hell I want. Damn what God expects of me.

And my life? Why, it presents me with plenty of occasions to do that. I don't have to go anywhere to find fresh opportunities. They're in my own living room and marriage. They're in my own workplace. They're among friends and colleagues, teammates and family members, boyfriends and girlfriends. They're right here at church. For wherever there are others, I must be first. Wherever there are others, I must determine what is best for me, and not God.

And this is what I call good.

But not God. What I call good, He calls evil.

And what I call evil, He calls good.

When to do good and be righteous I must not get my own way? That's what I call evil!

When to do good and be righteous I must suffer? That's what I hate!

And to me, that is the very valley of the shadow of death. As indeed it is. For it is the constant dying of the Old Man.

But this is the mystery of redemption by the Cross: If you have been redeemed by the Cross, you will be transformed to the Cross. For just as sin was put to death in the Cross of Christ, so must it daily be put to death in you. That is the valley of the shadow of death.

But here. Here in this shadowy valley of suffering where all I can see are my greatest enemies—my own corrupt nature, my own sin, my own death. And where day by day these things don't evaporate and go away, but even become more apparent to me. Here in this shadowy valley, the Good Shepherd still remains *my* Shepherd. And He continues to call to me in His Word and Sacrament that I may listen to His voice—to His voice that says, "I AM the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. Your sins are forgiven. I've made your death Mine. And My life I've made over to you."

For here where I'm surrounded by my enemies, He gives me the safety and protection of His holy Church. No sheep of Christ's ever walks the way of the Cross alone, but in a flock. The flock of the holy Church. The flock of your own brothers and sisters and Christ.

And there, when my sin assails me and I pant for righteousness? I have His Word and voice. He comes to me with the water of my Baptism and revives me. And where I see nothing but death, He gives me life in His Body and Blood! Food and drink for the way of the Cross.

Life in the midst of death.

The beginning of the life where there is no death.

The life that the Good Shepherd took up when He had laid His down.

The life He now lives to make it mine eternally.

And this is that necessary catechesis for which this Sunday can't go unobserved. It's why it's got a Latin name. Redeemed by the Cross, fellow-redeemed, you will be transformed to the Cross by suffering. But take heart. For your Good Shepherd who laid down His life for you is with you. In His Holy Church and Word and Blessed Sacraments. And by them He keeps you safe in this valley of death to bring you to everlasting life with Him.

Amen.

pax dei, etc.

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