

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

It's always a bit puzzling, at first, for Jesus to say "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The puzzling thing isn't so much for Jesus to be the shepherd but to be the good one by what he says he does. One of my girls one time heard that when we read during our devotions and asked, "how is Jesus a Good Shepherd by laying down his life?" I responded to this by saying, "well, that means he dies for the sheep." There was then, of course, a follow up question, "why does that make him good and why are we sheep?" Leave it to a four-year old at the time and now five-year old to ask questions like these ones. Those questions, though, are incredibly important ones to ask when hearing this gospel reading. It gets far beyond simply Jesus in this serene image of a shepherd out in the grassy fields with sheep. There are elements to that and in other places but here it's something far bloodier.

"[Jesus said:] "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."

That Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd is telling. Let's look first at that word, "good." There is more than one word for "good" in Greek. The word that Jesus uses here has a meaning of beauty and noble. This is nobility not in the sense of a social class but in the sense of being noble like when, for instance, one might say it is noble for a man to sacrifice his life for his country. It is noble that Jesus lays down his life for his sheep. This is also beautiful. It's beautiful because of God's mercy shown to you. This is the work of God and God's handiwork is beautiful. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, this same word is used after God would create and look upon his creation and saw that it was "good." God's work is good. Jesus is good and what he does is good. The Lord does this all for your sake, for your benefit, that you might be redeemed. And that is good for you.

That gets you, then, to begin to answer the question "why does dying make Jesus good and why are we sheep?" Knowing what Jesus means by "good" this continues to be answered in the Epistle reading. St. Peter preaches in this reading, "He [Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." Tying this in with the words of the Prophet Isaiah you heard on Good Friday, Peter shows you what this all means that Jesus is the Good Shepherd by laying down his life. There is a purpose in it all. Jesus doesn't just lay down his life for its own sake, he has done for you.

Jesus says, in the Gospel reading today, those familiar words from John's Gospel, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Those words are so profoundly simple here and really give us the person and work of Jesus for us; they can't be overstated. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, your Good Shepherd, and he has laid down his life for you.

The notion of laying down his life for your, or literally in Greek "on your behalf," shows what makes the death of Jesus different than any other death. There is a benefit when Jesus lays down his life for your sake. In Romans 5 God, through the pen of St. Paul, talks about this when we hear, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

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This is what makes Jesus not just a good shepherd but “The Good Shepherd.” To be his sheep, then, is to be his own and know him. The death of Christ benefits you and without it you are left under God’s wrath and condemnation. There is, though, a temptation for us is to lose sight of this in our lives and turn the Good Shepherd into something he isn’t. The Shepherd leads and the sheep follow, it’s not the other way around. This is why hired hands even come into the picture in the first place. A hired hand does what those who pay him say to do. His interest is simply in his own job security and sake. His concern isn’t necessarily for the sheep, so long as they are happy and have what they want him to give them then he keeps being the hired hand.

Our sinful nature wants counterfeit shepherds. It wants to find our comfort and trust not in the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for us, the sheep, rather who we pick to represent our voice and our ideals. It’s not always so blatant as rejecting Jesus but can be seen in other ways where we place our fear, love, and trust in persons, institutions, nations, or ideas that try to put themselves on to the same level as God. You don’t have to search far or long to find hired hands. But Jesus, and only him alone is the one who has laid down his life for you and gives you eternal life. Jesus cares for you to even when he calls you to repentance. He is the one who cares for you to call you to listen to his word even when it seems so foreign to the world today because his words are the words of eternal life. He is the one who sees the wolf coming and doesn’t flee rather he lays down his life and guards and protects you with his rod and staff. He is one who gives you life.

You see who you are in all of this, you are his sheep. What does that mean? What do sheep do? They hear the voice of their shepherd. That’s how the Smalcald Articles, one of the documents of the Lutheran Confessions, talk about the church. Luther even brings up that, “God be praised, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and ‘the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd.’” It’s also no coincidence you call me “pastor” as it comes from the word for shepherd. What am I doing now? I am preaching to you as your shepherd as I am an under shepherd of the Good Shepherd and you, the sheep, are hearing the voice of your shepherd, your pastor, speak to you in the stead of your Good Shepherd, Jesus, who laid down his life for you.

Your life as a sheep, then, is seen and known in Jesus and his death on the cross for your redemption. Peter also connects this another way that helps you understand the work of Jesus as your Good Shepherd and who you are as his sheep living in this world. Before words in that Epistle reading about the Shepherd and the sheep, St. Peter writes at the beginning, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” There is an example you see in the suffering and death of Jesus. This preaches to you and teaches something about what God has done for you and what this means for your new life in Christ. You want to know what righteousness is and what true goodness and beauty are? Behold your crucified Lord. This is also how you understand God as love, and this is how the Father loves the Son. Right after the Gospel reading ends Jesus said in John 10:17–18, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who is the good Beloved Son obedient to the Father, and you benefit from this obedience of the Son to the Father. When Jesus received the commandment of the Father to lay down his life, he did this willingly because this is all the love of God for you. When the Bible says “God is love” it doesn’t mean some abstract notion of love man may concoct. No, you know God is love by what Jesus has done for you and have the love of God as Romans 5 proclaims, “For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.”

That example of love God calls you to follow, and it is true, good, and beautiful. To follow Christ is to follow in that example of righteousness and love. It’s to sacrifice even all if necessary for your neighbor. This is especially the case when you think of God teaching about the love a husband for his wife, which is no coincidence is an image of Christ laying down his life for his bride the church. Sacrifice and love go together. Often in your life these may be small

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things but the love is still the same as you love each other as Christ has first loved you. Let your love be defined by Christ and his word and you will see and know all that is good and find refuge when you fail to love your neighbor as yourself. That's because the example of Christ is not simply an example but his love for you forgives you and gives you eternal life freely and fully.

As God's sheep listen to your Shepherd and go where he leads. Find refuge in his care and protection as well. Jesus speaks about seeing the wolf coming. Notice Jesus doesn't say, "if the wolf comes" rather it's a given that the wolf is coming after the sheep. Many things can be the wolf, but the danger is all the same. Be it the world trying to distract or entice you with its cares, ideas, and activities or something else all of it wants to devour you and it's all what you pray for God to protect and deliver you against in the Lord's Prayer when you pray, "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." Even the hired hands are dangerous as they leave you without any protection. They preach a word that is simply fluff and no real substance. Jesus, though, is the Good Shepherd and he will never throw you to the wolf. He will cover you with himself and let the teeth sink into him so that you will emerge, even from death, unscathed and in reality, better off than what you have been before. Hide in Jesus and cling him who has clothed you with himself in the waters of your baptism. You are sheep and he is your Shepherd, and he doesn't leave you alone either he brings you into his flock, the church. The Holy Spirit has called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified you as the flock of God. Jesus promises you that not even the gates of hell will prevail against his church. Wander off and you mark yourself as a morsel for the wolf. Clinging to Christ, however, you are safe and secure from the wolf because Jesus has overcome sin, death, and the devil and gives you the victory he has accomplished. This is who you are as his sheep and what God calls you to do as you hear his word and feast on that body and blood given and shed for you.

God calls you to follow the Good Shepherd and not be swayed to wander away from him. Listen to what he says as his sheep hear his voice and follow him. In this Easter season you see vividly this eternal life the Good Shepherd gives to his sheep even as he is the first fruits of the resurrection from the dead. The Good Shepherd is your Good Shepherd. He is the one who has called you out of the darkness and into his marvelous light. He is the one who has laid down his life for you by his death on the cross and the one who gives you that life in the waters of your baptism. In life, he is your Good Shepherd. In death, he is your Good Shepherd. For eternity he is your Good Shepherd.

The Lord's mercy has been and is shown to you in Jesus who laid down his life for you. Thanks be to God this day for his abundant mercy. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." You are the flock of Jesus and that's extraordinary. Jesus has laid down his life for you and brought you into his flock, the church. There are so many promises that you have as the flock of Christ. Jesus gives you eternal life. Jesus knows you and you know him. You don't just have a head knowledge, but he knows you as you have been clothed with him the waters of your baptism and you know him as you have faith in him given to you by God and you feast at his Supper eating and drinking his own body and blood. God's word is your pasture where you find nourishment and he sustains you through this life until that day when you will be raised and stand before your Shepherd in that new creation he will create for you and all of his flock. This is the joy of the Good Shepherd and it's the joy for you as his sheep. What a noble and beautiful life this all is for you. God looks upon his work in Christ when he sees you and sees it is good, very good indeed because Jesus is the Good Shepherd who has laid down his life for you and just as he has raised up his life again so he shall raise you up from the dead to live forever.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.