

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

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

One of the things I love about the Scriptures and really theology for that matter is how much can be said in so little words. The Gospel reading today is short in terms of its length but it’s rich in the proclamation of the Gospel for you. This is something God reminds you of and preaches to you this day. It’s an important thing and really is the gospel itself. When Jesus reveals to you who he is, he doesn’t just do it some general or abstract way. He tells you who he is and how this is the case. When Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd” he tells you what the Good Shepherd does. Jesus has laid down his life for you. There’s confidence too in this because you see his faithfulness when you behold him as the crucified and risen Lord. You see his work for you completed and know that you stand forgiven and are one of his sheep as you have been baptized into Christ; crucified and risen with him.

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.” The notion of laying down is his life for your, or literally in Greek “on your behalf,” shows what makes the death of Jesus different than any other death. Romans 5 says, “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.”

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 because without it, you are left under God’s wrath and condemnation. You need one who is good and noble in his life and death one who alone has the authority to lay down his life for you and raise it up again.

To be a sheep of Jesus is to have been redeemed by his life laid down for you. That’s because you can’t do it on your own. You are defenseless against sin, death, and the devil. Your life has been bought with a price. In our day and age, we think so much about being individuals or being our own people but the truth of the matter is in our sin we are slaves under the reign of sin, death, and the devil. The reading from 1 Peter refers to this near the end when we heard, “For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

Straying sheep get themselves in trouble and by nature, without a shepherd, go away from where they need to be grazing. You know, this is something we all understand. We all get it that to be a sheep of God is to hear his voice and follow him but look at how easily we will throw that out the window and follow the voice of another shepherd. It happens in our own lives when we start to think we are independent and don’t need a shepherd leading us. We think we can determine in our lives how things are going to be in terms of our Christian faith or even how we define ourselves and our existence. (I was talking about this last weekend with a group of college students.) But notice something about this, God doesn’t call you a shepherd. You are a sheep and sheep must be led, fed, and protected. They must listen and go where the shepherd leads or be wolf feed ready to be torn to shreds. This is why Jesus warns the sheep, he warns you to not wander off searching for what you think may be greener pastures. Don’t be fooled.

The temptation for us too 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 in the reading. A hired hand does what those who pay him say to do or whatever keeps him safe. 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. When he feels threatened, the hired hand

doesn't lay down his life for the sheep and suffers for their sake, he asserts his own will, demands respect, and attacks the sheep rather than step in front and take the blows.

Yet 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, our ideals, strokes our egos, or any number of ways. 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. Now with everything being livestreamed it's even easier. But Jesus, and he alone is the one who has laid down his life for you and gives you eternal life. Jesus cares for you to call 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.

A way that vividly preaches that Jesus is your Good Shepherd to you is when you look at the death of a Christian. When life is gone from the body there is only one place you find hope and life in the midst of death. In death, the death of a Christian, there is life because of the Good Shepherd laying down his life. What only matters in death is being a sheep of the Good Shepherd. Only the Good Shepherd has laid down his life for the sheep and only he has taken up again and will raise you up on the Last Day. The Good Shepherd knows and takes care of his sheep. In death, the sheep of God are clothed with the Good Shepherd.

Consider with this the Christian funeral. One of the most wonderful images in the church is when a saint who has departed this life is laying before the altar of God at the funeral service. What covers the casket is a white funeral pall pointing to the Christian's baptism where sin was washed away, he was rescued from death and the devil, given eternal salvation, and clothed with Christ and his righteousness. It also invokes this image of being a sheep of the Good Shepherd. Knowing the Good Shepherd is everything. It doesn't matter who you are, where you live, what country you have allegiance to, none of those things will save you, it is only the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep.

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 we 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.

Jesus said, "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." Jesus is your Good Shepherd. He is faithful in all that he says and does. You especially see this as he has laid down his life for you. It's out of his great mercy toward you that he has done this and gives you in return forgiveness, life, and salvation. Jesus knows you. He knows his sheep. He continues to shepherd you through life now. How he does this is through his word and sacraments. This is how the Holy Spirit makes you his sheep, brings you in, and keeps you in the flock of God. These are the means by which you have Christ and his benefits and where his pasture of the church is found. He graciously gives them out and shows this is where green pastures are found. When all around you is dying God gives you life because he has first laid it down for you.

And with that, you know what else? It's Easter and Jesus is risen from the grave and draws you to himself. He leads you through life and shepherds you as only he can do. As sheep you hear his voice and follow him where he leads and teaches. The days of grazing are long but the food is plentiful because Jesus provides. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, also gives you this image of what you will have when Jesus raises you from your grave and you stand before him. "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not

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strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Fix your eyes on the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and is your Good Shepherd. See and trust him as the one who has stepped in front of the wolf so that you are kept safe. See him crucified and behold his love for you and have the forgiveness he has accomplished. See him risen from the grave and know that he will shepherd you even through the valley of the shadow of death into eternal life. All of this is yours as he has baptized you and place upon you his holy name.

Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd.” There’s so much said for you in so few words. This is your Lord who clearly proclaims to you who he is and who you are to him. 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.” What a joy it is to have such a Shepherd for you who does know you, his sheep, and you know him, your Good Shepherd now and forever.

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