

Easter III *Misericordia Domini*

1 Year Series

The Third Sunday of Easter is given over to the imagery of the Good Shepherd. This picture appears to have been precious to the people of God for a very long time. Perhaps it was a familiar motif even when David penned those familiar words of Psalm 23 over three thousand years ago. Frequently the kings of ancient kingdoms would style themselves as a shepherd. Interestingly Amos uses that kingly word for shepherd to identify himself when challenged. Perhaps he was a sheep mogul of some sort, the Bill Gates of some ovine empire. NT Wright's excellent little book, *Simply Jesus*, also explores this extensively as it describes the expectations of first century Christians.

Jesus of course uses this picture language to great effect in the Gospels. Some of the earliest images we have of Jesus involve this motif of the shepherd, usually carrying a lamb on his shoulders. The picture on the right is from a third century fresco in Italy. It depicts Jesus as a beardless shepherd, carrying a lamb on his shoulders.



Even though we are no longer an agrarian culture for the most part, the image retains a great deal of impact for people. Who among us has the slightest idea what being a shepherd is like first hand? Yet, the image of Jesus the good shepherd is plastered on the walls of countless day cares and preschools operating in church basements. It adorns our Sunday School materials and it is name of many a Lutheran parish.

The image is really a proclamation of the Easter truth. Jesus has risen from the dead and he is not just listening to angelic choirs singing celestial top 40 today. He is caring for you. He is watching out for you. He loves you. That is not only a past or a future statement, but most importantly a present statement. Jesus has risen from the dead so he can take care of his sheep.

For people today this might just be a really good Sunday. Yesterday I heard Bill Nye being interviewed. While I don't usually care much for some of the things he says, he said this: If you like to worry, this is a great time to be alive! In a dark time of unsettled news in the realms of politics, international affairs, and, it seems, in every sector, this Sunday could be a most welcome ray of light. Jesus rose from the dead to take care of you. Of course, that might also lead some folks to question just how good he is at this if all this garbage is taking place in our world. But the promise is not that he will keep us in the comfortable confines of the sheep pen, but that he will go with us when we walk the valley of the shadow of death. He seeks out the foolish and lost sheep, but in that time before they are found it is often pretty uncomfortable for the little lost ovine.

It should also not be forgotten that the shepherd carries that long staff, often with a crook in it. Yes, he uses it to fend off the predator who would devour the sheep, but most often it is used to pull an errant sheep back in line or even to deliver a whack where it would do the most good. The tender care of the shepherd may leave us rather tender at times. This will not be perceived as

enjoyable in the midst of it, but in retrospect the sheep will consider that this too was the love of God in his or her life.

If you want a helpful and very brief read consider Phillip Keller's *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm*. He offers interesting insights into what it is like to be a shepherd. Not being one myself, more of a gardener and cattle person by upbringing, I cannot really comment on the veracity of all his insights, but they make for good sermonic material. I had sheep farmers in my parish in Roseburg and they said that he did get what it was like to be a shepherd.

Here are some thoughts I gleaned from the book and put out there for you in past years:

1. Sheep are not dumb; they are in fact pretty smart. But they cannot see very well. So they often will not be aware that a gate is open. The shepherd will have to physically grab one of them, lift them through the gate before the flock will enter.
2. Sheep can hear quite well – able to identify the voice of a shepherd. Hence God does not say to us, “see this and live” but instead he says “hear this and live.” The preached word is a “heard” experience (pardon the pun).
3. Sheep need a fair amount of care – they need still waters and green pastures and it takes the consistent care of a shepherd to bring them to these places. Sheep will drown in running water; they will graze a pasture to the roots if left in one place consistently. They also are too indiscriminate in what they eat; a shepherd constantly has to be looking out for poisonous plants.
4. Sheep are ungulates, which mean they have multiple stomachs which are used to digest the cellulose that we cannot digest. This is a very gaseous process and a sheep that lies down improperly will be “cast” or “cast down.” This means that the gasses in their stomachs have built up in their abdomen and they literally cannot get up. They roll on their backs with their feet in the air. Such a sheep is vulnerable to predators. (If you are familiar with cattle who have the same sort of digestive system, this is called “bloating”) This means a shepherd must constantly count his sheep and be aware of how many there are (“if you have 99 and lose one” – she probably laid down wrong and is just over the knoll and cannot get up.)

There is much more that you could find. A good preacher, even if he is in a city where people have never seen a sheep will want to sound a little like a shepherd today. In fact, that is what Pastor means.

As we said earlier, to call Jesus the Good Shepherd is to make a statement about Jesus' constant care and concern for his people. He is daily, constantly keeping an eye on us, warding us from the dangers, leading us to the healthy places, defending us from the predators.

What is Jesus doing today for us that is shepherd-like? To what can we point? Sometimes a shepherd just watches – he does not constrain the sheep's life or force it to eat or drink. Today Ezekiel declares that God himself will be our shepherd – Christians hear that as good news. Jesus

still is busy caring for his wounded sheep. Do we say that Doctors, Nurses, and Antibiotics are the gifts of your shepherd? Remember that those things really did not exist when Jesus proclaimed himself a shepherd and was healing. Is the development of the medical establishment part of his shepherding? But what about when we lose our job or get really sick. Is that then a failure of the Shepherd? I don't think so, but how will we proclaim this? Great, I have Jesus here, but I am still hungry! What do we say to such a person? Clearly this is a matter of hope. We do proclaim the hope for the resurrection – the shepherding of Jesus takes a rather long view of things. At the same time, to proclaim Jesus the shepherd is to speak to his care for the suffering of his flock.

Perhaps we need to point to Lutheran Social Services, Bethesda, or another good thing that is happening. I have heard that LSS is the only social agency in North America which is allowed to take unaccompanied minor refugees. The lost boys of Sudan were all sponsored/brought to the US by LSS, mostly in New England. There are many times and places when the hands and feet of God, his Christian people, are the primary means for caring for little, least, and lost people. The mentally handicapped, the homeless, the preschoolers, and many more find welcome in the churches where Jesus' people gather. Here is the Shepherd at work, not only to me but through me.

Do we also need to point to the good that comes to me through this fellowship? Do I need to see the love we show to the grieving widow and the hungry man, the child, etc? I think that we often struggle to call our congregations places where we see the loving hands of Jesus at work. That will take some practice. Often these are not very dramatic or emotionally laden events. The little group of people who gather for coffee or to go golfing together or to camp together as a family might in fact be a great opportunity for Christ to be building up his flock. Our human tendency as a pastor is often to notice what is not happening “We have no mission to the poor!” or “We have a poor ministry to youth!” Our job is to proclaim what Jesus is doing! Don't focus on the stuff which is not happening. Find the Shepherd at work!

We should also note here that the Luther material is excerpted and edited heavily this week. The Good Shepherd imagery seems to have pushed a button in Dr. Luther and his postils are extremely long and frequently return to a favorite subject: the failures of the Church in his time to shepherd the people of God properly. I have largely omitted these sections for the sake of space but thought this one worth including:

36. We have not rebuked and attacked the papacy because they live wickedly and shamefully (which they themselves also must confess) Rather, we say to them that, even if they led holy, angelic lives (which they have never done and never will do) and kept not only their own law but also Moses' Law (both of which are impossible), we would still regard them not as hirelings but as wolves themselves because they teach nothing except what kills souls. That which is not the doctrine of Christ cannot feed or give life to the souls. Also, even though the hireling does not himself slaughter and kill, still he does not restrain the wolf. Therefore, because you do not

point out or teach this Shepherd, but do the opposite, we should not and will not listen to you, but rather flee from you as from the wolf.

(Luther's Works, Vol. 77. CPH, 2014. P. 184)

Collect of Day

O God, through the humiliation of Your Son You raised up the fallen world. Grant to Your faithful people, rescued from the peril of everlasting death, perpetual gladness and eternal joys; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God raised up a whole fallen world. The gift of Christ on the cross was not to our souls alone or even to the Christians alone, it was to the whole world. Every sinner, every sin, every broken, dying person and the whole world are objects of his love and care expressed in that cross. Lutherans have a wonderful doctrine of vocation that gets worked in here. The man who is outside washing his car, napping on the couch, playing with his children, or at some office or factory getting his work done is serving God too. He has redeemed the whole world, all of its parts, in the blood of Jesus, it all has been raised up in the resurrection of Jesus, not just us, but the whole world.

Having been rescued from the perils of everlasting death, we ask for perpetual gladness and eternal joys. Are these synonyms or different things? Is gladness what we have now and is joy looking ahead to the future? What would perpetual gladness look like? How would we describe it? Some have critiqued the whole notion of heaven as being absurd because the human being needs to suffer, needs stress, in order to grow. One biology professor I know discounts the idea because he cannot imagine life without death. Others believe that an eternity without stress and disappointments, will lead to indolence, sloth, and a lack of ambition. They seem to envision a heaven which is populated by people perpetually overdosed on Valium or Zoloft. This seems to me to be a fundamental failure of imagination. Science sometimes lives in a pathetically small world. It does truly important things in helping us understand the world around us, but those who insist that it is the sum total of knowledge really do live in a tiny little universe sometimes.

This prayer is imaging a whole different world in which these limitations of our experience are not true. But how do we describe heaven and its joy meaningfully? Should we even try? We pray for it, but do we really know what we are praying for? Does it not defy our imagination? I firmly believe this is why we dare not relinquish a serious reading of the creation story. It challenges us to imagine a perfect world before the fall. And if we can imagine that world, we have the spiritual imagination to hear and believe the promise of the next.

This also points perhaps to a challenge to our self-perception. Does eternal joy not require the greatest change to take place in our own minds and in our own hearts? It may be true that the person that I am right now cannot live without sadness and stress. But God is not going to raise that sort of a person from the grave, at least not and leave them thus. I will be tremendously transformed so that in heaven, without the goad of sadness or the pinch of need, I will continue

to be productive, continue to be curious, and loving, I just won't need suffering to goad me along. It is a failure of imagination which looks at heaven as boring or without impetus for doing anything. It is a failure to imagine what God can do which makes heaven boring for so many folks.

Readings

Ezekiel 34:11-17 The imagery of this chapter is somewhat muddled, or at least it is a metaphor which is pushed far beyond what my high school English teacher would have thought appropriate. I have included the whole chapter for us because it runs throughout.

The word of the LORD came to me: ² "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. ⁶ My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

⁷ "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸ As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, ⁹ therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰ Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

¹¹ "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

¹⁷ “As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. ¹⁸ *Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet?* ¹⁹ *And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?*

²⁰ “Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ *Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad,* ²² *I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep.* ²³ *And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.* ²⁴ *And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.*

²⁵ “*I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods.* ²⁶ *And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing.* ²⁷ *And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land. And they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslaved them.*

²⁸ *They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them. They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid.* ²⁹ *And I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations.* ³⁰ *And they shall know that I am the LORD their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord GOD.* ³¹ *And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord GOD.”*

Some Preaching Points for this passage:

- 1. We want the folks to take to heart that the Lord judges how we treat one another. God sees when people turn church and relationships into places of sinful exercises of power and domination.*
- 2. We want folks to see that God himself intervenes. God doesn't delegate salvation.*
- 3. We don't get away with anything.*
- 4. Vs 31 – We are the human sheep of God's pasture.*

We thought that the final verses were necessary to cast the vision of what it means that God will be the shepherd who delivers us. The first part asserts that he does it, but these omitted verses really tell us what that looks like and captures the imagination of the hearer better.

Notice that God is the actor in all of this. We think of the incarnation and properly so, but the incarnation does not end with Jesus ascent into heaven; it continues through us today. When I

forgive, does not Jesus say to us that we forgive with his words? Who is rescuing the lost sheep when I am the preacher who preaches and the shepherd who seeks out the lost? It is not me who saves, it is always Jesus who saves. The shepherd has to remember that or he will suffer from the great medieval vice of pride against which Jesus has already spoken. I take this to mean that God is empowering the ministry of his people. The pastor or deacon who speaks and acts in Jesus' name has the promise found here that God is active, doing this work. I cannot save, my words are meager, my deeds are weak, but he is strong and able.

For a vacancy situation this can also be a really good message. The under-shepherd might be called away, the man may die or leave for a variety of reasons, but the real shepherd makes a promise here. He will not leave his scattered people. The real shepherd whose words and deeds lent strength and power and grace and love to every pastor's sermon will never leave.

The image of shepherd is an ancient image. It was not invented by Jesus in the Gospels, but he had sown it throughout Middle Eastern cultures for over a thousand years prior to his birth in Bethlehem. Along with Psalm 23, Ezekiel develops this picture extensively in the OT. We also know that non-Israelite people in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Asia Minor used this image to speak of their gods and their rulers. The title for the Moabite king was "shepherd" hence Ezekiel is tapping into a very common language here, one which we may find somewhat alien, but which should be more familiar to us. The idea is that the king (shepherd) and the people (sheep) have a mutual relationship of responsibilities and obligations to one another. If the shepherd does not take care of the sheep, he will not long be a shepherd. I think the events of the Arab Spring of the past several years are actually a continuing witness to this. The peoples of Tunisia, Lybia, Egypt, and Syria, to name a few, were not being well shepherded. Eventually this becomes intolerable and the king/ruler is ousted. It happened in the ancient world too.

The words of our reading may seem like pretty good news, God takes the side of the poor and weak sheep who have been kicked out, but I really think this might be scarier than we know. For the judgment is not between sheep and wolves but between the sheep and sheep. Here Ezekiel is mixing his metaphors and my English teacher would not have approved. The fat ones who have drunk deep from the waters and feasted on the fare of heaven have also been shouldering out some folks, muddying the water, trampling the grass, etc.

What is Ezekiel really talking about here, especially as we would consider our own task as preachers? Is that a picture of the church today? Too many have an idea that the church is cold and uninviting. If you have not read the book entitled "UnChristian" you might want to. It recounts some rather scary ideas about what young people think of us. Too many have had their tender faith stepped on by the arrogance and pride of those who wear crosses and knelt at communion rails with them. By the time we have gotten around to forgiving our neighbors, it does look a little like the second hand grass that Ezekiel describes, stepped on and sullied under foot. Have we stood on the mountains and whispered the good news, opened our doors and glowered at the folks who came through and cursed the stream of cars that don't turn into our

parking lot? Is there room in our church for God to bring in the multitudes as he has done in the past? What if he did? Would you be at all ready for that?

In Utah I used to challenge my congregation that God could lead the prophet of Mormonism to declare that the Lutherans were right and they should all come to the Lutheran church tomorrow and seek wisdom. What would you say? Are you ready for that? Would you be willing to welcome them, even them? Would you be willing to teach them? What if they taught you a few things? For all of us this hits home. What if he brought the person who has hurt you to church? Is the blood of Jesus big enough to cover that sinner and his sin? If it isn't, we really have to ask if the blood of Jesus is big enough to cover you.

God loves all the people of the earth, the Hindus in distant lands and the Scientologist or Druid wannabe that lives down your street. God's judgment of me and my attitudes here seems harsh and it is.

The good news is that the shepherd who leads the flock is none other than Christ himself. We would make a terrible country club of this, only admitting our own sorts of people into membership until it would probably boil down to me and thee and I would not be too certain about thee. Jesus has a way of blasting this apart. The church that does not reach into its community will soon find itself dying, as many of our LCMS congregations slowly drift into irrelevance within their own communities. His kingdom still comes however and people continue to be drawn to his cross. It just might not be an LCMS cross they gather under. But he will shepherd his people. We may fail, but he does not. My family, my loved ones, my world is in his hands. This doesn't all hang on me getting it right, but it rests in his hands.

The church of today is not different than the church of Ezekiel's day those centuries ago. The answers are not really to be found in the proper program or the preacher browbeating his folks into the right attitude. The answer was then, and remains today, the Davidic Lord, the same Jesus who stands and shepherds the flock, the great good shepherd whom God has raised from the dead. We could proclaim that shepherd today and do well, but I think our attention will actually be drawn to the Gospel reading today. But beware, this is not as sweet as it sounds.

Sermon Idea - God shepherds his people (OT – That the congregation of believers who are in vacancy or in some turmoil over their pastoral office would hear and believe the good news that God has sent his Son to be their shepherd.)

This sermon wants to calm troubled hearts. The office of ministry is always bigger than the man who fills it. Jesus reaches out through human beings, empowering their words and deeds, but he never limits himself to one or another such person. He remains, even when they must die or leave or disappoint us. He cares about the little and often neglected sheep. He sees their hurts and does something for them and about them. That aid may come from surprising quarters.

The congregation which is struggling with a crisis or simply a conflict with its preacher may well feel as if they are being punished or that they have no shepherd. Who is watching out for them? Who is carrying them home when they have strayed? Who is leading them to quiet waters and

green pastures? The preacher will need to articulate this fear and anxiety. The congregant may not be able to do so. It will help to have a sort of laundry list of things that Jesus does through people as he cares for them.

It will also be important to remember and remind the people that God has always worked through the very flawed and broken human beings that he calls. Peter could put his foot in his mouth. Paul appears to have been a little short-tempered. David was an adulterer and murderer. Expecting the instrument of God's work in our midst to be perfect is not reading your text carefully. God uses the very sinful human beings he forgives to be the instruments of his gracious care and love.

But his care is expressed through more than those who simply hold the office of Pastor. It might even be expressed through you. The preacher will want to hold up the community in this. We are in the very capable hands of a shepherd who never loses sight of the little harassed sheep. I don't know exactly what that will mean for us, but I am confident of God's gracious and loving care for his flock.

Ezekiel sees a terrible time when shepherds were abusing the sheep, when the sheep themselves were cruelly treating one another. This double problem is worth spending a moment on. We often give preachers far too much credit and far too much blame. It is true, the flock needs a shepherd. But shepherds don't make sheep, only sheep make sheep.

Ezekiel sees a grim situation. The person who is looking at such a time and place must feel that God had abandoned them. Ezekiel wants the discouraged Israelites of his day and us to know this truth – God has never left his people. There are many things to which we can likely point as well which look like God is not here. Human sinfulness is real. Our enemy uses it to whisper in our ear that our God does not care for us. Our trust in Him is foolish and we should abandon any hope for his aid.

But Jesus overcame that foe on the darkest day of all, when the sun hid its face and earth the quaked, when nearly every friend fled and Roman soldiers pounded cruel nails into his hands and feet. He knows what that abandoned feeling is like. "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?" he cried.

But God had not abandoned Jesus to the grave nor did he let his holy one see decay. God's care and love for him and for you is eternal, patient, and does not fail. Ezekiel's people would find God's gracious care in Esther's brave leadership as queen, in Nehemiah's efficient governance, in Ezra's faithful service as priest and prophet. Because God cared for his exiled sheep, they survived, endured, and came to flourish once more. All of those places were unexpected – Esther was a Jewish girl who was unexpectedly raised to the queen of Persia. Nehemiah was cupbearer to the emperor of Persia. Ezra was perhaps the most likely of those who gave pastoral care. But all of them were instruments for God to watch out for the sheep of his fold.

What he has in mind for us, I cannot say, but I can look forward in hope to what he does.

Psalm 23

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

⁴ 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.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

The preacher who finds himself without time to prepare his sermon this week might just walk through this text for a sermon, verse by verse. As you prepare, consider reading it with an emphasis on the pronouns. Notice how all the actions in the indicative are ascribed to God and the emotions and the stative verbs are ascribe to the believer.

I Peter 2:21-25

We have jumped here, the first 18 verses of chapter include some familiar words which show up in other places in our pericope system. But the preacher will want to take them into account. I have included several verses leading up to our reading because they significantly affect the meaning of the passage we are considering.

¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

¹⁸ *Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.* ¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹ 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. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Luther

1. This beautiful, apostolic Epistle was prescribed for this Sunday undoubtedly because at the end it agrees with the Gospel reading about the Good Shepherd. St. Peter says, "You were like straying sheep have returned to the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls." However, it could be a part of preaching on His Passion, for he speaks here about the suffering of the Lord Christ and presents Him as an example for us imitate. Previously in this Epistle he has taught the Christians that after they have faith they are to demonstrate its fruits by good works in all kinds of situations. But he especially admonishes them to the fruit which is called "patience in cross and suffering."

2. When someone has become a Christian and begins to confess faith with his mouth and life, it cannot happen otherwise on earth: the world (which is the faithful, obedient servant of Christ's eternal enemy, the devil) will not be pleased. The world regards it as contempt and disgrace when we do not speak, live, and do what and how it wants. It becomes angry and begins to persecute, harass, and even to kill them wherever it can. That is why we often hear even their wise men, the scoffers, say that Christ could have had peace if He had wanted it. They could say about all Christians that they could certainly have peace and good days, if they would only listen to them and make themselves agreeable and conformable to the world...For this purpose St. Peter here wants to admonish and stir up, and then comfort, the Christians with significant words and reasons.

5. First he cites their calling, to remind them why and for what purpose they became Christians...

6. "What would you do, dear Christians?" Would you be in the world and suffer nothing evil (in return for your good deeds), but instead become angry and because of their wickedness also become evil and do evil? Are you not listening? You were called to this. Your Baptism and Christianity brings with it that you must suffer these things. That is why you have renounced the devil and confess Christ. That is why you were plunged into the water, so that you would

venture into all kinds of misfortune in the world and suffer from the devil.” You will not elude this, because you must be in this inn where the devil is the innkeeper. You live in a house which is everywhere full of smoke. Here, if you want to have fire, you must also have smoke; if you want to be a Christ and God’s child, you must also suffer what happens to you because of it.

7. In summary, A Christian, just because he named a “Christian,” is thrown under the dear, holy cross so that he must suffer either from people. Or from the devil himself, who afflicts and alarms him both [outwardly] with misery, persecution, poverty, and illness [and] inwardly in the heart with this poisonous arrows.

9. Second, to make this admonition all the stronger, he holds up the true Master as our example: our Head and Lord Christ...He suffered not for Himself, also not only as an example, but FOR US. Not even the least bit of that can be reached, and no saint can all boast that he has, according to this example, suffered for others in the way that Christ suffered for our sins.

13. This is the high, chief article of the Christian doctrine. Faith alone grasps it as the main property and comfort of our salvation.

46. You have no heard your Shepherd’s voice, He has brought you back to Himself out of idolatry and all kinds of straying ways. It was earned not by you, but was obtained for you through His wounds and blood. Therefore, take care how you live (he means to say), no longer like straying and lost sheep. Rather, you have been converted and brought back to follow your dear Savior. In Him you have both a good Shepherd, who diligently feeds and cares for you, and in addition a faithful Bishop, who watches over you everywhere to protect and keep you with Him.

(Luther’s Works Vol. 77. CPH, 2014. pp. 154-171.)

In today’s age when every wrong is greeted with a law suit or some other forms of vengeance, Peter’s message is decidedly countercultural. This is even more so when we consider the verses leading up to this. Submission and obedience are not exactly popular concepts today. Of course, as the tapes and messages of the young people who were on the sinking ferry in Korea are made public, obedience and submission to authority have taken a serious hit. Korean culture strongly values authority and the submission of individuals to that authority. When the captain and crew of the vessel said “Don’t move!” the obedient high school students remained in the cabins which became their tombs. Do we take from this the idea that submission and obedience is a bad thing? Many have used such examples to advocate for a radical liberty of the individual. But this has usually been an excuse for all manner of sinful behaviors. Peter seems to be addressing that in the passage which is in the italicized portion of the text above. There he writes that our freedom should not be a cover for sin. Our freedom is the freedom to live the life of God’s goodness.

More commonly, Peter’s admonition is interpreted by many as a form of weakness, as if he were advocating that we be a doormat of sorts. The world does not value this sort of meekness, it finds

it a weakness, but the Christian notices that this is actually a much greater strength. Jesus conquered all when he submitted to the cross. When we strike back we are reduced to the level of the one who oppresses us. It is only the strong who can bear suffering this way, only the one who is strong in Christ's strength, demonstrated in the cross.

Peter's argument seems to be that to suffer for doing good is not an occasion for self-centered pity; but an occasion for the strength and the grace of God to be revealed in the person. When we suffer unjustly and endure, this is the grace of God at work. Being in the field of education, I am convinced that this is not a value of Americans. For most of the students that I see, even just suffering, getting a paper docked because it is turned in late or sloppily done, is an occasion for much complaining.

Peter is calling on us to think very differently about our suffering. Our salvation was accomplished through suffering, suffering which was patiently and willingly born for the sins of the whole world. Our lives, which are connected to his life, will naturally reflect his approach to suffering. Suffering is a gracious moment in our lives. Are we big enough to understand and live that way? It is an easy thing to consider in the abstract comfort of our study, but what about when it really happens, when our salary gets cut, or someone unfairly accuses us, or when someone storms out of the congregation hurling insults at us, even though we know that they are really just frustrated at what they will find at home? How do we react when that happens? Do we look "Jesus-like" in our suffering or do we assume the defensive and score settling posture of the world?

Some years ago I was in India, and I was given to visit a number of places where the IELC is working. At a girls hostel in Ambur I was literally mobbed by hundreds of young girls whose smiles and songs were absolutely infectious and amazing. Doubly so when I looked around and saw the difficult conditions in which they lived. These were young girls who were sent from their rural villages to live in the hostel so they could have a chance to go to school. Their shower was a bucket and a cup to pour water over their head, their chapel was so small they had to worship in shifts. There wasn't a blade of grass on their playground, but they were happy, so happy to be there. I think of some of the students my wife taught who were incensed at the idea that they might not be able to play middle school basketball because they are failing a class. Everything is handed to them and they still are not happy and they are not motivated to do well. I was in Church early in the morning near another Indian school and I saw these girls streaming in to pray; it was exam day. They wanted to do well and knew that Jesus was there to help them do well. It was really impressive to watch them kneel and pray before dashing out to their exams.

John 10:11-16

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes

only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² 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. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.* ¹⁸ *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.*”

Luther

1. This Gospel reading, I think, is used on this Sunday because here Christ announces that He will give His life for His sheep, that is, suffer and die; and yet He also shows that He will rise again, because He says, “I have still other sheep, whom I must bring also”, etc. If he is to be and remain a Shepherd for His sheep, then He must not remain in death, as He Himself later explains and interprets in clear words. “I have the power to lay down my life and again to take it.”

33. (T)he hireling and the world, are always together. The devil can easily tolerate such teachers, for (when the true Shepherd not there) they serve him so that he can rend apart and wreak havoc among the sheep without any trouble, when and as he wants. There is no way to prevent it except Christ with His teaching and protection. He (as the only true Shepherd) does not let the sheep be slain by the wolf (for if that happens, then they are already in his jaws), but Himself stands against him, gathers us to Himself, and protects us so that the devil must yield. That means that we preach from Scripture that no human work or activity (no matter how good it is, even done according to the Ten Commandments), and nothing we can teach, helps at all to free from sin or to stand against God’s wrath and the fright of death and hell, etc. Rather, the only thing that helps is that Christ has laid down His life for you and taken it up again in order to overcome the devil and death and subject them to Himself, so that you are preserved through His strength and power.

34. But when the voice of this Shepherd remains, the sheep can protect themselves from both the hireling and the world, saying: “You preach correctly that I should keep the Ten Commandments, but you do not tell me where that leaves me, because I have not fulfilled them. In this situation I will listen to my dear Shepherd who died for me; He did not die without reason or in vain, but just for this: to save me, who was such a poor, lost sheep without a Shepherd, in the power of the wolf.” So also when the devil shows his teeth to your heart in order to slay and devour you and says, “You should have done or avoided this or that; you have

not done or avoided it; therefore, you must be mine,” then, as a lamb who knows its Shepherd, you can take refuge in Christ, You can tell the devil to stand against the one who died for you and rose again and see what victory he can have against him.

39. However, if you know this Shepherd, you can defend yourself against the devil and death, saying: “Sadly, I have not kept God’s Commandments, but I crawl under the wings of this dear hen (my dear Lord Jesus Christ [Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34] and believe that He is my dear Shepherd, Bishop, and Mediator before God, who covers and defends me with His innocence and gives me His righteousness. Whatever I have not kept, He has kept; what is more, whatever I have sinned, He has paid for with His blood,” etc. He died and rose again, not for Himself but for His sheep, that is, as St. Peter says, “The righteous died for the unrighteous” [I Pet. 3:18], etc. So, then, you are secure, and the devil along with his hell must leave you alone, for he certainly cannot get anything from Christ, who has already overcome him. He defends and keeps you, if you believe in Him as His lamb. As a faithful Shepherd, He does not leave you but stands by you.

40. If you are now secure under this Shepherd against the wolf, the hireling correctly comes and becomes a good teacher of how you should live according to God’s Commandments and do good works. He leads you where you yourself can now go (since it is apart from the struggle of the conscience against sin and death) in such a way that you are first in the protection and pasture of this Shepherd and do not depart from Him.

(Luther’s Works, Vol 77. CPH, 2014. Pp. 172-193)

Jesus is the good shepherd. This is the story which was told me at the time. It has a certain ring of truthiness, so I repeat it here. My vicarage congregation was the oldest Lutheran parish in Las Vegas. The charter members chose this Good Shepherd metaphor of the Gospel as its congregational name. Then an ALC congregation started coalescing a year or two later a little north of them. They were going to call themselves “First Lutheran” which really irked the LCMS folks down at Good Shepherd, so they went and changed their name. I served at “First Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and School.” It made this Sunday really interesting because they had a beautiful stained glass window with the good shepherd motif and we could point to it and talk about the first good shepherd.

What makes a good shepherd? The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Having just come through the pathos of Holy Week with its scourging and crucifixion, this is emblazoned on the minds of our hearers and us too.

Jesus contrasts this with the other guys, the hirelings, who flee when the wolf approaches. We have something of a controversy brewing in Oregon right now. A pack of wolves in Idaho has recently crossed the river and shown up in Oregon sheep country. Scores of lambs have been slaughtered, and the rancher used a little technology to videotape the lupine perpetrators in the very act of slaughtering his lambs. This is visceral for folks out there. They exterminated wolves

from eastern Oregon for this very reason. They don't want them back. They are asking permission from the state to shoot predatory wolves who are working their vast flocks of sheep. They look over the border to Idaho and see hundreds of wolves in multiple packs and they are afraid.

Of course the environmental types, mostly found in the urban areas of western Oregon, far removed from the brutal financial realities of scraping a living off inhospitable lands east of the Cascade Mountains, are not happy with any suggestion which involves harming these noble, free ranging members of a healthy ecosystem. One of my colleagues on Concordia's faculty is leading the charge on that, recently interviewed by the New York Times.

It is enough to make one glad that he or she is not a legislator who has to deal with this. The ranchers don't want to flee, they would really like to protect their flock employing the firms of Winchester or Smith and Wesson. We are not afraid of the wolf in the same way that Jesus' audience was. Perhaps our wolves are better described as the things that cause us great fear. Is our predator cancer or some viral plague? Is our wolf the forces of the economy or war?

Jesus lays down his life for the flock, he puts it on the line. Death has swallowed him and choked. He knows his flock, they know him. He has become one of them in death, and they have been united to him in his resurrection. They are known this way by each other.

Jesus also has this rather enigmatic line. "I have other sheep." Having spent a few years in ministry in Utah that line was pretty important. Mormons believe that refers to the lost tribes of Israel who migrated to North America and were in fact the Indians, especially the Mayan/Aztec sorts in Central America, but really all the Native Americans. Some time ago, I spoke to our missionary among the Native Americans in Washington. He was alright with being called "Indian" but said he was really glad that Columbus wasn't looking for Turkey when he got lost.

For John's audience the most likely allusion here is to the gentiles. By the time John is writing, most of his audience are in fact non-Jewish and the whole Jewish debate has pretty well be settled. Christianity will be predominantly a gentile group. The hardening of the Jewish position against Christians seems to have already taken place, but it was still pretty fresh. Paul wrote about it, both in terms of his hurt and his hope for a softening in Romans 9-11. That was only a few decades prior to John's writing and his audience would have remembered when it was a living and raging fight.

Of greater importance is the way Jesus talks about his own death and how that expresses his unity with the Father and our unity with him. Jesus does not have his life taken away from him. He gives it. It is a real gift and because it is a real gift, it is also returned to him. Does that mean then that our lives, being real gifts from him are also empowered to be one with him and Father in that they can be truly given? Does this suggest that the cruciform pattern of Jesus life, the sacrifice which he has made has become the pattern of our own lives? I believe so. How does one preach that?

The Christians of long ago actually changed the posture of prayer to reflect this cruciform shape. The idea of folding our hands and bowing our heads is actually quite medieval. It says we are shutting off the senses to focus inward when we pray. The ancient Jew stood with eyes open and looking up when he prayed, his hands lifted up to heaven in a gesture of reception. Many of the Early Christians lowered the hands until they were pointed out, imitating the look of Jesus on the cross. Of course this made long prayers something of a matter of muscular stamina.

The sheep become like the shepherd in that once they are redeemed and restored, they turn around and see the rest of the flock with totally different eyes. Empowered by Christ's work in their life they become the ones who give their own lives in service and sacrifice to others. Jesus received this charge from His Father. We receive a similar charge from Him.

Sermon Idea - I am the Good Shepherd (Psalm and Gospel: That the Spirit of God would move the hearer to believe and trust that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead so he can shepherd him/her.)

1. It would not be hard to feel like a lost, even an abandoned, sheep today. Sheep are rather helpless before their problems, many of which they create themselves. Our homes are being foreclosed on, our mutual funds keep getting smaller, the world looks more and more dangerous.
2. Where is Jesus? Is he up in heaven listening to Angelic choirs sing while I perish here below in a meaningless few decades that mean nothing to the eternity which I am promised, but which hurt so much right now?
3. Jesus is up there, but he is God, remember, he is right here too. He can live every moment six billion times, just so he can spend this moment with you. He knows hunger, weariness, poverty, and want. He knows sickness and disease, he walked the roads of Palestine and he cares that you suffer. His own death on a cross is his solution, and today he lives and reigns to take care of you.

This sermon is for the congregation which is in need of comfort this day. The second sermon is the challenge, this is the comfort.

We have too often subscribed to the real absence of Christ in our lives and this world. It is born of a subtle and widespread idea that this is the physical world and God is a spiritual being and he is not really all that concerned about the material problems we face. This is simply wrong. Jesus was born in a manger and shed real live red blood on a rude cross in Jerusalem because he hates pain, he loathes death, and he agonizes over our sorrow and problems. Hunger sickens him. While our juvenile minds would like him to create an enormous stash of bread somewhere which would allow all the hungry people to be fed, we have to count on his wisdom here. This really is the best way to do this, and oddly he has included us in the solution. (I wish he had waved his omnipotent little finger and taken care of this for me.)

Jesus has risen from the dead to deal with the real issues of this world. Yes, he leads and guides his precious people to heaven. It is what good shepherds do, they bring their flock home. But through that flock, that is you and me, he is also present in this world addressing its real problems of hunger and loneliness and fear. All along the way he is right beside us, beating back enemies we don't even know are lurking out there, because he walks beside us. He keeps us moving, he takes us through hard mountain passes and deep dark valleys sometimes. It is a long way and there are lots of strays to round up. But we have his promise. He goes with us wherever we may be, the very ends of the earth.