

Shepherd of the Springs Lutheran Church

Third Sunday in Easter

Text: John 10: 11-16

Theme: *The Sheep-hood of All Believers*

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (Vs. 11)

This morning is Good Shepherd Sunday, here on the fourth Sunday after Easter. It turns our attention to how the resurrection of Jesus sheds light on the significance of the crucifixion of our Lord. We have understood already how the resurrection reveals the success of the redemptive work of the cross. One of the images we have from His baptism as well as the the Upper Room in the context of the Passover meal is how Jesus will go to the cross as the *Lamb of God* Who will be offered up, not by men, but rather by the Father as the perfect sacrifice for the penalty of our sins. The imagery combines both the Passover lamb and the unblemished lamb who was slain on the Day of Atonement in the Holy of Holies in the temple. Here Jesus is still alluding to his forthcoming sacrificial death on the cross, but we are the sheep and He is a shepherd, indeed, He is the Good Shepherd.

It is difficult to understand or appreciate this shift in metaphors without understanding some things about sheep and your typical ancient world shepherd. First, Jesus upgrades our image of him over against your run of the mill hired shepherd. When the wolves come to devour the sheep, the hired shepherd bails leaving the sheep defenseless against the ravenous wolves. But Jesus is the Good Shepherd who defends his sheep even to the point of giving his life for them. How does this make us look? Well, Jesus was not always very flattering when He wanted to teach us something about our identity in relation to Him or what we should be about under his Lordship. Remember how in the upper room He used foot washing to exemplify the kind of work he has given for us to be of some earthly good in the world as we would live under his Lordship. Foot washers for Christ! Not very flattering indeed! Well here in the 10th chapter of John, Jesus presents another rather unseemly picture of what it means to be the people of God under his lordship. He identifies Himself as a shepherd . . . yes, the Good Shepherd. But again, this is not very complimentary about the nature of our identity. If he is the Shepherd than that means that we . . . we are the Lord's flock. We are sheep. Peter referred to us as a royal priesthood from which Luther coined the term, *the priesthood of all believers*. Keying off Luther's language but working with Jesus' imagery here, we could perhaps call ourselves *the sheep-hood of all believers!* It is not a very flattering image, but our text this morning would have us, nevertheless, consider its important implications.

What is it that sheep need more than anything else? Is it not true that what they need the most, and what good shepherds spend all their time doing, is keeping them

alive. Yes, the shepherd's singular duty is to keep the sheep alive. This is no easy task. It requires dedication and constant 24/7 active work. Sheep are simply never in a condition to take care of themselves. You could never think of them as the king of the jungle. Sheep have virtually no survival skills. The beloved twenty-third Psalm paints a rather romanticized picture of the Lord leading his people like sheep to the green pastures and the still waters. This is very necessary when it comes to sheep. Unlike most animals, sheep cannot smell water fr. They would perish of thirst on one side of a hill if they were not led to a rushing river on the other side. And since in arid regions, the grass is green only where water is nearby, sheep will also not find suitable pasture without being led to it. And, of course, we all know that sheep are rather defenseless from a whole host of predators that would easily feast on them if they were not constantly protected by the shepherd.

So, if Jesus is the Good Shepherd and we are the sheep-hood of all believers, this imagery helps us to appreciate and take to heart some very important things about our condition and the importance of our Lord and His work in our lives. And what does this image reveal that we need most of all? It is this: like sheep, we need to be kept alive. Survival is our greatest need. Like sheep, we have no real instincts for what we need for proper food and drink and we are easy pray for spiritual predators who would take our life in Christ from us. We need daily sustenance and we need a Shepherd to locate and provide it for us. We need good guidance that would lead us to good food and good drink. We need to be provided these things, or we perish. And secondly, we are living in the valley of the shadow of death. We are currently living in a fallen creation in the presence of deadly powers and principalities that would seek to devour our life in Christ and bring us to ruin. We have no natural defenses within ourselves against these deadly enemies of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

As the Good Shepherd, it is central to his vocation to keep us alive, even to the point of sacrificing His life for us in the face of our enemies, which is just what He has done on the cross. But then dead Shepherds are not in a position of offer any further care of their flock. But, alluding to his resurrection in the verse that follows our text, Jesus says that as the Good Shepherd, He lays down his life that He may take it back up again (vs. 17). Good Shepherd Sunday and the words of our Lord here in our Gospel serve to remind us that we do not simply owe to Him and His saving work, the new life that we have as reborn citizens of the Kingdom of God. Rather, the image of the sheep-hood of all believers helps to build our awareness and appreciation that we are a sojourning people who have not yet been brought to the safety of our Heavenly Home. We are living in the valley of the shadow of death, not our final resting place in the green pastures beside the still waters. We are also a people who have not yet been brought to the full maturity of the stature of our Lord according to His human nature. We have been reborn in the image of the Second Adam, but we are still as yet little lambs - babes in the kingdom. We have no self-sufficiency, we have very poor spiritual instincts, and we are dependent on being rightly led and fed or we will perish. We

need to be provided the pure milk of the Gospel to keep our faith-life in Christ alive, healthy, and growing - and we need protection from all the evil forces in this world that would seek to destroy us and our inheritance as the people of God. The sheep-hood of all believers means that we are simply not sufficient unto ourselves. We have been given a life with Jesus as our Good Shepherd, lived with others who comprise a part of His flock. We need constant and continual care from faithful under-shepherds who have the heart and dedication of the Good Shepherd or we will be led astray, we will starve, we will become prey to the evil forces of this world, and we will perish if not brought back to the faithful tending of the Good Shepherd. Little lambs of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. It is not very flattering. We are not kings of the jungle. Nevertheless we are in the jungle of this fallen world - and thanks be to God we are there with our Good Shepherd who is keeping us safe and sound, who is leading us to our heavenly home - caring for us, feeding us, tending to our every need. The sheep-hood of all believers! Not many religious folks are going to flock around that sense of identity. But such as we are as we are live with our Good Shepherd.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. A-men.