

*P Christ is risen!*  
*C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Every year the Fourth Sunday of the Eastertide is celebrated and referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday. We call it Good Shepherd Sunday because our Gospel lesson appointed for this Sunday is always from the 10<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John's Gospel where we hear about the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. And of course, the appointed psalm for the day is the very well-know Psalm 23.

- <sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd;  
I shall not be in want.
- <sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.
- <sup>3</sup> He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his name's sake.
- <sup>4</sup> Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- <sup>5</sup> You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;  
you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.
- <sup>6</sup> Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The Lord is our shepherd...and I think I can say that we are his flock or at the very least we presume the role of the flock. As his flock, are we satisfied...are we in want...or are we simply sheep that really cannot say?

Today within our worship together the Lord has spread a table for us. In this Holy Eucharist, the Lord is feeding us. The Lord is feeding us with his very Word that is the appointed lessons read for us. Our Lord is also feeding us in the very bread and wine set before us.

The Psalm also reminds us that, we, the anointed, the Baptized, are gathered with those who trouble us. While there may be some who trouble us within this gathering, the Psalm is revealing not just "MY" brokenness in this gathering, but the brokenness of the body of the gathering. Nonetheless, we trust and we have faith in the Shepherd who has gathered us together.

Our appointed Gospel ends at verse ten, but we look to verse eleven and hear Jesus say very clearly;

- <sup>11</sup> 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.  
(John 10:11)

With all of this said about the Good Shepherd we can conclude that we are the flock. But we are a mysterious kind of flock aren't we? When we consider the flock to be sheep along with all we have heard about sheep and how stupid sheep can be, we would not consider ourselves as stupid...far from it. We are a flock that knows all about the shepherd and we are a flock that knows all about God and how God operates. We know the flock and we know who does not qualify as part of the flock...because we surmise what is good for the flock from our standpoint.

Quite frankly, we as the flock know this because there is not a soul sitting here today that would consider themselves stupid sheep. But when we, the flock, look closely at the Gospel text we might begin to find ourselves a bit confused...NOT stupid...but just a bit confused because we would never conclude ourselves as stupid.

The Gospel text does however raise a few questions for us the flock. Questions such as, is Jesus the gate, the gatekeeper, or the shepherd? What is the gate and what does the gate open for us to enter into...is it a gate to a pen, a barn, or the flock? Who is Jesus speaking to in this passage? Who are the thief, the bandit, or the stranger that Jesus is speaking of? Is Jesus warning us about them or is he just informing us about them? Do we know the voice of the shepherd if he were to call us right now? Is Jesus calling right now to us?

These are all very simple questions that I am sure we can all parse out and come to our own conclusion about because we are not stupid sheep...perhaps curious and maybe a bit confused, but NOT stupid. Then in turn, we'll want to inform others of our conclusions so we don't look like stupid sheep. But then...do we really listen to or follow where the shepherd leads? Maybe we really are just stupid sheep, at least I pray that I am anyway?

I pray this because I truly cannot come to understand or believe on my own about who or what the shepherd is and our Small Catechism has pointed this out for me, a stupid sheep:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, I do not know the answers to all the questions, but I do know that God, through the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith...simply because I know no better. God keeps me in the true faith...a faith that allows me to follow God's will and NOT my will own. Yes, the Lord is my Shepherd and my response to this Shepherd is...I follow.

We are in the Gospel of John and as I said before, "sin" is NOT a moral category about behavior within this Gospel, but it is a theological category about one's response to the revelation of God in Jesus...one's response to the revelation of God in Jesus.<sup>2</sup> And we hear Jesus explain sin a little later in this Gospel when he is explaining the work of the Holy Spirit:

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. <sup>8</sup> And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: <sup>9</sup> about sin, because they do not believe in me; (John 16:7-9)

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<sup>1</sup> Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. The Small Catechism, page 355, par 6.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible, In Twelve Volumes, Volume Nine, The Gospel of Luke, The Gospel of John*. Nashville: Abington Press, 1995. The Gospel of John 9:1-12, The Healing Miracle, page 653.

Simply put, the Advocate, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, has revealed the Good Shepherd who has gathered us, his flock...what now is our response?

Do I ignore my faith and follow the voice of the shepherd derived from cultural standards drawn from our own nihilistic egos, or standards drawn from an ethos that bubbles up from a dog-eat-dog mentality. This shepherd that comes from our culture claims the strong are superior and the weak suffer what they must so that the strong can grab all that they can and justify that behavior by claiming if they don't someone else will.<sup>3</sup> This shepherd...this cultural shepherd...will not lay down his life or even entertain the notion for a moment, nor will this shepherd develop a relationship with the flock because he is too busy using them for his own benefit...is this who we believe our shepherd to be. Since we are NOT stupid sheep, do I follow my own conclusions drawn from a cultural ethos or follow the Good Shepherd who does not use me to elevate himself as a shepherd, but lays down his life so that I may live, abundantly?

Each week I begin my sermon prep by listening to a podcast from Luther Seminary. It is a podcast that has three professors from Luther Seminary discussing the week's appointed lessons. One of the professors, the Rev. DR. Matthew L. Skinner, a Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary asked a very interesting question that has been on my heart and seems to have been the unintentional directive of this sermon today. DR. Skinner asked why do we have Good Shepherd Sunday during the Eastertide? We could have had it in any other season, why Easter?

Looking at our liturgical year, it begins with the Season of Advent and we see this as a time of anticipation, expectation, and preparation for the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. I guess we can say we can't really celebrate a shepherd that we await his birth. Christmas is all about the birth and the glorious celebration of salvation and grace for the world given through this birth. We move then to the season of Epiphany a season that reveals to us Christ our King. Shepherds were considered the dregs of society, how could we possibly celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday when we are celebrating, not just the Baptism of our Lord, but the coming of the wise men bringing gifts to visit the Christ child, who by so doing "reveal" Jesus to the world as Lord and King. The green season of Pentecost or the season of Ordinary time celebrate every aspect of the life of Christ in his life, his teachings, his parables, his miracles. In this season we are looking at all aspects of the life of Christ and the Good Shepherd aspect is much more significant for us.

But Easter, for me, reveals the heart and soul of our Lord and this is why I believe we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday during this season. Celebrating the Good Shepherd reveals a profound relationship that, like our Lord Jesus Christ, a good shepherd has with his flock. Easter is about Jesus Christ's victory over death and His resurrection means eternal life for those in relationship with God through faith. Easter shows us the relationship God establishes with us through Jesus Christ who is the manifestation of God's love for us. And in the desire to establish a relationship with us through Jesus Christ, God does so in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ's victory over death. This is the very heart of the Eastertide.

The Paschal Mystery is a singular event that can never be repeated, undone, changed, corrected, substituted, equated, or superseded. The Hebrew word PASACH, is a reference to the sacrificing of an innocent lamb that becomes the means of salvation and deliverance of NOT just the

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<sup>3</sup> Brooks, David. "The struggle for America's soul, again." LNP, Lancaster News Paper, Opinion, Saturday, April 29, 2023, page A13.

Israelites from captivity in Egypt but for us as well in our deliverance from sin and death. We are delivered from the captivity of sin and death when God sent His Son to be *our* paschal lamb. This is what the Eastertide celebrates and commemorates and is the very essence of our faith.

While Jesus does not specifically call himself the “good shepherd” in our Gospel lesson today, very truly I tell you He is the true Paschal Shepherd who has laid down his life for us. Our Gospel today may have us running in all different directions in our attempts to understand and to define who or what the good shepherd is and is not. Nonetheless, the Good Shepherd can be parsed out any way you want it to be. But no matter how you choose to see the Good Shepherd, he has established a RELATIONSHIP with us...His flock by laying down giving life for us. Yes the Good Shepherd has given his life so that we may have life abundantly, but our Good Shepherd is not dead, He is risen, He is risen indeed and so we follow because we know His voice...

*In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*