

*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.*

For the last three Sundays we have heard and celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ and within each of the appointed Gospel lesson for those Sundays we have heard about the resurrection in slightly different ways. It is my prayer that you have found comfort in the Good News of this resurrection that we celebrate so far in this Eastertide. However, this day we look at Christ a bit differently. Today, we celebrate our Lord as a shepherd and this day, the Fourth Sunday of the Eastertide, as Good Shepherd Sunday. It's become known for this because it is the Good Shepherd who leads us out of the darkness of death and into the light of the Good News of the salvation we share in the resurrection of our Lord. The Good Shepherd is of course Jesus, who, by dying on the Cross, lays down his life for you and I, his flock, his sheep.

Now over the years I have also noticed that some preachers have facetiously taken this opportunity to preach about the stupidity of sheep...either forgetting or simply not thinking that it is Christ Jesus who is the good shepherd and we are his sheep or the Lord's flock and that would include the dismissive preacher who is part of Christ's flock too, but nonetheless, openly calls their flock stupid. You and I are His flock and it is the shepherd's voice that calls you and I, gathers us, and feeds us...this is the voice you and I both follow.

But what makes us like the imprudent sheep is that we assume things about the flock and our faith. What I mean by this is that we have this faith that we think we have accepted and because we have accepted this faith we can now enter through the gate into this exclusive organization or fellowship known as Christ's flock. In other words, I've accepted Jesus Christ and by doing so, I have accepted MY faith in Jesus Christ therefore I am now accepted into this exclusive fellowship of the Good Shepherd's flock. And while I recognize that we are protected by the Good Shepherd, may we keep in mind as we sit safely in our assumptions, that this exclusive assumption about this passage also keeps others out. John's Gospel is not divisive but unfortunately, we tend to hear it in a divisive tone...such as: these belong to Jesus and those do not.

This is certainly not how Jesus operates. The image of the Good Shepherd that Jesus is painting for us with his words today in this Gospel passage is actually an explanation or the conclusion to the story at the end of the prior chapter to our lesson today. The story that begun at the end of chapter 9 of John's Gospel is of the man that was born blind that we heard back on the Fourth Sunday of Lent.

The story begins with Jesus walking along and he sees a blind man. Now this blind man would have already been a social outcast and folks would have avoided him just like we avoid the homeless street people when we encounter them. But he does not call out to Jesus, it is Jesus who sees his infirmity and simply heals him. This blind man, like the homeless of our culture, are viewed as folks "outside" the sheepfold... "outside" of society. Nonetheless, Jesus restores his vision and he does so on the Sabbath and this upsets the Pharisees because it goes against "their" law and their understanding of that law. And so they bring the man before the Pharisees and they interrogate him and refuse to believe him to the point where they even bring this man's parents

before the Pharisees to be interrogated as well. The parents do not engage in the interrogation for fear of being cast out of the temple. But to no avail, the blind man is cast out again...but once again, it is Jesus who finds him and there is this wonderful dialogue between this man and Jesus at the end of chapter 9 just before our Gospel lesson begins today. John tells it this way:

<sup>35</sup> Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' <sup>36</sup> He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' <sup>37</sup> Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' <sup>38</sup> He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. <sup>39</sup> Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' <sup>40</sup> Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' <sup>41</sup> Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains. (John 9:35-41)

The Pharisees were blinded by their own self-righteousness and could not see God working any way other than their way. In this dialogue, Jesus positions the Pharisees in the role of the thief, the bandit, and the stranger because they do not see the flock's best interest...all they see is their way. Whereas, the conduct of Jesus toward the blind man, who sees, shows him to be the shepherd who seeks the lost sheep and cares for the entire flock. This is the true shepherd, the Good Shepherd to whom the sheep respond. This is what the Pharisees do not see and what they are blind to because they only see their own self-righteousness earned through their own ways and not God's way as "seen" in Jesus Christ.

Nonetheless, for me, there remains an unsettling divisive nature about this passage that makes me ask, can I see or am I blind and set in my ways and thinking about faith and who Jesus is? How can I search if I don't know that I am blind? Will my blindness then leave on the outside? What about those on the outside of the gate? Well, according to this lesson...they are the thieves and the bandits. But then I ask...is there mercy or grace and salvation for them? Are we simply looking at what we want to see? We can only hope. St Paul in his letter to the church in Rome reminds us:

<sup>24</sup> For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. <sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:24-27)

There are two words that I believe stir within our thoughts about the Gospel lesson today...acceptance and recognition. In our interpretation of today's Gospel, we feel that if we accept Jesus as our shepherd, or we accept Jesus as the gate, then we will recognize Jesus as the gate and be part of the flock and we will have life and have it abundantly...if we accept Jesus as our shepherd, if we accept Jesus as our savior...if we do this. I ask then as St Paul asks:

<sup>14</sup> But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? <sup>15</sup> And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' <sup>16</sup> But not all have obeyed the

good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’<sup>17</sup> So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:14-17)

It is Christ who calls us his own, or as we hear today, He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...leads them out of a self-centered self-righteous understanding to be a part of the abundant grace given through the one true shepherd. By *His call* we know his voice and not by our own assumptions and understandings. This is also the way we as Lutherans believe this and is made clear to us in the Small Catechism within the explanation of the Third Article of the Creed which I have proclaimed so many times:

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. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.<sup>1</sup>

God accepts us, without judgment, embracing our worth despite our flaws and in that acceptance, we then are able to recognize the grace that we are given in Jesus Christ. The blind man did not go looking for Jesus, Jesus found him. The blind man did not accept the healing of his eyes, it was given to him, freely, and in that gift given, he recognized Jesus in it. The Pharisees did not recognize the healing and refused to recognize the one who did it.

Today, Jesus calls us, by name showing us that God has accepted us and we recognize Him as our shepherd and our grace...and we recognize Him here today, in this worship, gathering us and nurturing us in the very simple meal we are given. Remarkably though, we assume to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior...but in that assumption do we accept Jesus Christ as he accepts us, or do we accept Jesus as *we* want him to be? Likewise, do we fear the real me isn’t enough and we will be rejected. Do we really want to be seen with all our weaknesses and flaws, including all the crap we hide deep inside?

Acceptance means to be received as we are...and yes, Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, he is the holy of holies, He is the truth, the way, and the life, he is the Good Shepherd, and He is the Good News that accepts us just the way we are and that is just enough to be accepted as His own. Jesus Christ is God’s perfect love...is God’s perfect acceptance of each of us who have been called by name. It is this perfect love and acceptance that rescues us from sin and death and gathers us into his care. It is this perfect love and acceptance that gives to us eternal life and it is in this perfect love and acceptance we will never perish. And because of this perfect love and acceptance no one will snatch us from the hands of the Good Shepherd.

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

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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. Small Catechism, The Creed, The Third Article: On Being Made Holy. Pages 355-356, par 5-6.