

+ John 10:11-18 + The Good Shepherd Lives for His Sheep + 4th Sunday of Easter + 3 May 2009 +

Why does the picture of sheep and their Shepherd bring us so much comfort today? Most, if not all of us here don't live in an agricultural setting. We're not shepherds. We've probably seen sheep in real life and probably have even pet a sheep or two, but few of us have ever owned one. Unlike the Jews of Jesus' day, who lived in an agricultural society and knew well the picture of a shepherd and his sheep, that picture isn't quite so familiar, but yet we find comfort in images of a shepherd and his sheep. Why is that?

Well, this morning we join Jesus in Jerusalem six months before his suffering and death. There he explains why that picture of a shepherd and his sheep is so comforting even to us who don't live in an agricultural society. Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd, who would willingly give his life for his sheep—a reality that doesn't make a whole lot of sense, when you consider what sheep are really like, but Jesus is more than a good shepherd. He is the Good Shepherd, willing to lay down his life and take it back up again for his sheep. So sit at Jesus' feet and see how **THE GOOD SHEPHERD LIVES FOR HIS SHEEP**.

I don't know how much you know about sheep, but to put it bluntly, they're pretty dumb. In fact, the Greek word for "sheep" is pretty descriptive. It literally means, "Forward-moving thing". Pretty appropriate when you consider what a sheep knows how to do—Eat, bleat, and move forward. Being so dumb, sheep are pretty helpless. They don't know how to evade a predator. They have no fangs or claws, no ferocity to defend themselves.

Plus sheep often need more protection from themselves! Sheep have been known to crush each other if they huddle too closely inside their pen. If a sheep stumbles and rolls on its back, it can't turn itself over. It will just lay there bleating away with legs flailing. Sheep easily wander from the flock and get hopelessly lost even when they're within sight of the flock. Sheep are completely helpless, forward-moving things.

So it's not really a compliment to be called a sheep. If someone calls you a sheep, they're probably saying you follow blindly, that you're incapable of thinking for yourself, and you're completely helpless at the mercy of someone else. So how does that make you feel when God calls you a "sheep" like in Psalm 100, ***"Know that the LORD is God...We are his people, the sheep of his pasture."***?

To tell you the truth, as unflattering as it sounds, you and I are sheep. Perhaps you can already see the similarities spiritually speaking. On our own, we're unable to defend ourselves against the attacks of Satan, who, ***"prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."*** We can't stand up against the pressures of the world around us. We're easy targets. At the same time, on top of all that, we actually do as much harm to ourselves as our enemies do.

We crush each other with unkind words and actions. Though we know better, we still keep falling into the same pet sins. Like an upside-down sheep, we're dead in sin. Even when we're on our feet, we love to wander and get hopelessly lost as Isaiah described, ***"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way..."***

In fact, in our sin, we're often more like the useless hired hands of Jesus' parable. ***"The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep."***

We often fail to show love for others and for the Word of truth. In cowardice we run the other way when helping someone or standing up for the truth might put us in harm's way. "I don't want to stand up for the truth of God's Word. I might get picked on!" "I don't want to point out to a co-worker that his religion is leading him to hell. Things might get awkward—then think how hard my job would be!" "I'm not so sure about inviting my neighbor to church. I don't want to stick my nose in her business...I'll just leave her to the wolves." For our countless sins of abandoning others in need, we deserve to be abandoned to the wolves and torn apart.

...But that's not what happens. Our Good Shepherd cared for us. He loved us with a willing, unexplainable, undying love! Why? Why would a human shepherd willingly die for worthless sheep? Most wouldn't. "It's just a job! Who cares if you lose one or two? It's not worth risking your life!" That's not Jesus however. He said, ***"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."*** Jesus loved all people, even us, but why? We give him no reason whatsoever that he should love us. It's only because of his grace that we are saved. Jesus' undeserved, self-sacrificing love made him willing to risk his own life, willing to lay down that life, and willing to suffer the wolves' attack in our place.

How marvelous is the love Jesus has for helpless, unlovable sheep like us! Rejoice that he loves us so dearly! Know that if he loved you that much when you were his enemy, how much more does he love you now that he's redeemed you and made you his own?

Now someone might ask, who cares that the Shepherd is willing to lay down his life for his sheep, if he dies defending them? If the wolf kills the shepherd, the wolf suddenly gets a free all-you-can-eat sheep buffet, but that's not how it is with our Good Shepherd. Our Good Shepherd, not only loves his sheep dearly, but provides for them powerfully.

How does he do that? Jesus knows his sheep. ***"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me..."*** What kind of knowledge is this? It's not the kind of knowledge you get from history books or television. If I said, "Do you know Jim Boeheim or Donald Trump?", you might respond, "Yeah, I know who they are, but I don't know them." The kind of knowledge Jesus has is more like that of a parent who knows his child or a husband who knows his wife—a personal, intimate knowledge from experience. Jesus knows each of his sheep personally, intimately. In fact, he says that knowledge is ***"...just as the Father knows me and I know the Father..."*** Consider how well Jesus knows his heavenly Father. That's how well the Good Shepherd knows you.

In fact, Jesus knows you better than you know you. Is there a hurt or a need you're too embarrassed to admit? Jesus knows it. He knows your needs, your desires, your pains. That means he also knows all your sins—all your selfish thoughts, all your hurtful words, all your loveless actions, but Jesus also knows you need a solution to your sin and the hell you deserve, even if you don't. So the Good Shepherd provides for that need and defeated all those predators and all your guilt on the cross.

Jesus said, ***"I am the good shepherd and I lay down my life for the sheep."*** Take a closer look at what Jesus means. Where the English says "for" the sheep, the original Greek actually states "in place of" the sheep. That means the Good Shepherd willingly laid down his life as a substitute for you, but there's even more. We commonly refer to Jesus as the "Good" Shepherd, but does "good" really say it all? Usually we use the word "good" to say something is satisfactory. For example, "I got a good grade on my test!" or "This cake tastes good.", but the original Greek here means "excellent, praiseworthy, ideal, the very best." With that in mind, by God's holy standards, only Jesus can rightly be called "good". Only Jesus met God's demand for total perfection. That's why he's the Good Shepherd, unlike any other.

On top of all that, the Good Shepherd also became ***"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*** As the Lamb of God, Jesus took all your sins on himself, even those sins of running away instead of standing up for the truth! Then he willingly gave you his holy and innocent life in exchange for the guilt of your sins, but there's more! Jesus explains, ***"I lay down my life for the sheep... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."***

Isn't that remarkable? Not only did the Good Shepherd die for his sheep, but he also lives for his sheep! Even six months before his death, Jesus knew he would take his life back up again on Easter Sunday. Jesus knew he would destroy Death. Jesus knew he wasn't going to be defeated, but instead would defeat our enemies for us. **The Good Shepherd lives for his sheep!**

So we can rejoice because ***"we are...the sheep of his pasture."*** Because the Good Shepherd lives for his sheep, we can be confident that we are his own! It's no longer an insult to be called his "sheep", but instead the most comforting truth of all. That's why those artistic renditions of the Good Shepherd are so very comforting to us and in a way we are reminded of that comforting imagery of the Good Shepherd and his sheep Sunday after Sunday. We see the font, where the Good Shepherd made you his own through the water and the Word of Holy Baptism. We hear the Word through which the Good Shepherd holds us close to his heart. We partake of the Holy Supper through which the Good Shepherd nourishes our souls. When we realize the Good Shepherd lives for his sheep, who of us couldn't find comfort in that picture of sheep and their Good Shepherd?

Often those artistic renditions picture the Shepherd cradling a lamb in his arms—safe and sound as Isaiah once described, ***"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart."*** Brothers and sisters, that's where you are—held by him, loved by him, known by him. So then trust him who loves you perfectly, who knows you perfectly, and who died and rose again to provide for your greatest need—the forgiveness of sins. Even now he loves and lives for you. Listen to the voice of your Good Shepherd. With his loving concern, share him with those not yet in his pen and find rest in his everlasting arms. Amen.