

**+ Acts 20:28-35 + Christ Revealed Through Faithful Shepherds +  
3rd Sunday after Epiphany: Commemoration of St. Timothy, Pastor and Confessor + 24 January 2016**

It had been a pretty good Sunday for the little boy. His parents didn't need to take him out during the service. He sang his version of the songs as he paged through his children's Bible and said part of the Lord's Prayer that his mom and dad had been working with him to learn. In fact, he even went up front for the children's message before the sermon. It was a pretty good Sunday for the little boy and he was really eager to shake the pastor's hand after the service was over. When it was his turn, he ran up to the pastor, shook his hand, and said with a big, sincere grin, "Good morning, Jesus!"

The parents turned an instant shade of red and quickly moved their son along sheepishly sputtering an apology as they walked out the door. The pastor just smiled. This wasn't the first time that had happened. Other little kids over the years had done it and the little boy probably wouldn't be the last. In fact, it's happened to nearly every pastor at some point in his ministry, but why would a little child call their pastor "Jesus"?

Well, it certainly isn't because the pastor is Jesus or God in the flesh. Only Jesus himself can make that claim and, unlike Jesus, the pastor—like every other shepherd of God's flock over the centuries—is a sinful human being. While the pastor is privileged to personally minister to Christ's lambs and sheep, he's a sinful, wayward sheep too. He's always tempted to do his own thing and get his own way. He's always tempted to stubbornly dig in, when it would be better to lovingly listen. He's always tempted to let busyness be an excuse for not spending time with his Savior in the Word, and he needs tough love just as much as every other soul he serves.

So why would a little child call their pastor "Jesus"? In a certain way, that little one recognizes a Scriptural truth in their own childlike way. No, the pastor isn't Jesus. He isn't the Good Shepherd. He can't be, but Christ, the Good Shepherd, does reveal himself through faithful shepherds like that pastor. How does Christ do that? Let's listen to the Apostle Paul to find out.

For three years, Paul had been serving a growing flock of new believers in a city called Ephesus on the western shore of modern Turkey. Paul had taught daily in a local lecture hall, and the Lord had blessed his efforts. Little congregations had started meeting in homes around the city and even spread to neighboring towns and villages. So Paul spent time training the elders who basically served as the pastors of those little congregations.

Paul then traveled elsewhere to continue spreading the Gospel, but here in Acts 20 we find Paul stopping in a little port called Miletus to meet with the Ephesian elders. He was on his way to Jerusalem. Along the way, the Lord had made it clear that Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem and would eventually stand trial before the Roman emperor. Paul rightly wondered if this would be the last time he would ever see these beloved brothers in ministry.

So he met with them to say goodbye. Paul recalled how he had faithfully served the flock in Ephesus and how dearly he loved God's people. Many of the people they served had first heard the good news of their Savior from Paul, but it was time for one last instruction, one last encouragement. Paul urged the elders, ***"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."***

Who had entrusted all those souls to their care? Christ the Good Shepherd had sent his Holy Spirit to give those elders the responsibility they had as ***"overseers,"*** as those who were to oversee, to guard God's precious flock. They were to be ***"shepherds"***—"pastors" of God's flock.

...But what's the big deal? Why does God care so much for sinners who stray, who are stubborn, who rebel and disobey like wayward sheep? ***"The church of God"*** was purchased at an extraordinarily high price. It was ***"bought with his own blood."*** Think about that for a moment. God loved you so much that he allowed his own blood to be shed to ransom you from the destruction you deserve. Years later, the Apostle Peter explained this amazing truth further. ***"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."*** (1 Peter 1:8-9)

The loving Shepherd sacrificed himself for the sake of his unlovable sheep, and by doing so he purchased them, he purchased us for himself. Now Christ entrusts his blood-bought flocks to the care of sinful shepherds promising that through them he would reveal himself for their good.

So how does Jesus do that? He reveals himself through faithful shepherds who feed his flock with his Word. Years later near the end of his life Paul encouraged young Pastor Timothy to go back to the Scriptures that had made him wise for salvation since infancy. Through that Word, Christ would then bless his people. Paul wrote, ***“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*** (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

Christ reveals himself to you and me when faithful shepherds teach and proclaim those same Holy Scriptures. Through that faithful preaching and teaching, you come to know Jesus as your Savior—wisdom found nowhere else in this world. The Holy Spirit creates faith in Christ in your heart through the hearing and study of that Word of God—and then equips you for a life of service to your Good Shepherd ever eager to listen to his loving voice.

Christ also reveals himself when faithful shepherds watch over his flock and themselves, even being willing to sacrifice everything to protect God’s flock. Paul knew that trouble was coming to God’s people after he left. ***“I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!”*** God’s flock would be attacked by ***“savage wolves”*** who would oppose Christ and the true teaching of his Word. Even some of their own would stray from the true teaching of God’s Word and lead others away.

So how could God’s shepherds keep watch over themselves and their flocks? How do pastors guard the Lord’s flocks today? Through time spent with Jesus in his Word. Through time spent personally and devotionally studying God’s Word in depth. Through time spent with God’s people studying God’s Word and practically applying it to everyday issues and challenges. If a pastor is not in the Word of God himself, he cannot feed and protect his flock from savage and subtle false teachers. Yet if you are not in the Word, how can you be sure that I or any other shepherd is leading you on the right path towards heaven? How can you withstand the attacks of savage wolves in your midst or when times get difficult? Christ uses his faithful shepherds to guard you and your fellow believers with his Word. To do so, a faithful shepherd may need to sacrifice much more than you realize—his time, his health, his relationships, what people think of him, even sleep.

So why does he do it? Why would a shepherd put himself in harm’s way to protect a flock that doesn’t belong to him and often wants to just go its own way? Remember that you were bought with Christ’s own blood! Yet the shepherd of God’s flock is not forced to care for Christ’s lambs and sheep. No, Christ reveals himself through faithful shepherds who love his flock.

You see, Paul was what the old Germans used to call a *Seelsorger*, literally a “carer of souls.” He didn’t want his students, his hearers, or his flock to fall into error or have their faith shipwrecked. He didn’t want savage wolves to tear them apart once he was gone. He loved them too much to just let that happen. So he pleaded with them and warned them and taught them. You can hear Paul’s love as he pleads, ***“Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”***

Christ wants his pastors to have that same love for souls too—that love that cares for the eternal future of every soul in his flock, that love that wants to see every one of your souls in heaven someday. You see that same love moved Christ the Good Shepherd to lay down his life for you and me. In the end, that love of Christ enables a pastor to keep watch over himself and his flock, to protect them, to feed and nourish them, to love and care for every one of them, even as Christ continues to reveal his love to you.

At some point, you may have wondered why your pastor wears a white robe and a different colored scarf each week. One of the reasons that a pastor wears a robe is to take the focus off of himself and direct it towards Christ. The white robe or alb is a reminder that his soul has been washed clean by the blood of Christ—and so is yours. The colored scarf or stole is a reminder of the yoke, the responsibility that the pastor carries as he serves Christ’s flock. It’s light because Jesus helps him bear it.

All of it helps your pastor to represent Jesus to you as he proclaims God’s Word and administers Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. I’m not Jesus. I’m not God, but Christ reveals himself to you when I serve as your faithful shepherd. May Christ, our Good Shepherd, who purchased us with his own blood, continue to bless his Church with faithful, loving shepherds until he gathers his entire flock in the eternal glories of heaven someday. Amen.