

Sermon for Easter 4B / Good Shepherd Sunday

The Text: John 10:11-18

Life is a journey that takes us from infancy into adulthood. It is a journey full of ups and downs. Sometimes the path can be smooth travelling, at other times it is hard going. On occasion we can see the path ahead and we like what we see, only for things to take an unexpected downward turn. Other times, the rocky path smooths out in ways we never expected. So much in life is uncertain. We don't know in which direction the path will take us or what lies ahead.

King David knew well the journey of life with its joys and hazards. He saw a similarity between our life and the life of a sheep; we are both in need of a shepherd to be our guide and guard. David's confession of faith was: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."

As a shepherd himself, David led the sheep from the front of the flock by speaking to them, maybe even singing a psalm. They listened to his familiar voice, following him as they grazed. The sheep knew their shepherd's voice and would not follow another. David led the flock to green pastures and found calm waters for them to drink from. He cared for their every need. He protected them from attack by wild animals and he treated their wounds.

As sheep in God's flock we face many dangers. The biggest danger is to stop listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Jesus is our Good Shepherd and He leads us on our journey of faith by speaking to us. He is always speaking the Spirit filled Word; rebuking us to bring us back on track, forgiving and restoring us. His words are not always spectacular, or what we might want to hear, but they are always good for us. He gives us what we need. We are tempted to want new words, to hear a new voice and fresh ideas. We want to satisfy the desires of the sinful nature. Jesus says those who speak words other than His words are thieves and robbers and will only lead us astray.

Unfortunately, the thieves and robbers are part of the Good Shepherd's flock. They are deceived. They think they are doing good by leading the flock their way. They make bold promises that are not grounded in the truth, in Christ and His cross. They are more concerned with popularity and success. Despite their best intentions, they can only place the sheep in danger. Beware of shepherds who do not teach that all our needs are met in the Lamb of God who shed His blood for the sins of the world. As Luke tells us: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no name under heaven given...by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

Jesus knows the paths of righteousness. He is *the* Good Shepherd. He is the way and He leads us into a deeper understanding of God's grace to sustain and nurture our faith. We trust in Him because He has given His life to save us.

The Good Shepherd feeds us the nourishing pasture of His Word. It might not be the verdant green we hope for, but it gives us life. He gives us all we need. We have no want of body or soul. In times of drought, when our spiritual walk feels dry and God seems distant, the Good Shepherd is still with us providing what we need. He still speaks to forgive our sins and grant us peace.

What landscape are you travelling through right now? Are you in a good paddock with few cares in life? Are you battling a drought and struggling in your faith walk? Was last week more challenging than you thought it would be? Are you searching for something that life is not giving you right now? Do you struggle to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd above the noise of the world? Do you need a quiet place to rest?

Whatever you are going through the Good Shepherd knows and He cares. He has laid down His life for you to earn forgiveness for you. He has made you of His flock and you live under His loving care.

The Good Shepherd is speaking His life-giving Word to you. The best place to hear the voice of your Good Shepherd is in the Divine Service amongst God's gathered flock. Our Lutheran worship is a rich variety of God's Word to hear the Good Shepherd's voice: sung liturgy, spoken responses, hymns, Scripture readings, preaching, prayers, and blessing. Jesus gives His gifts in every part of our worship.

But not every part of the Divine Service will speak to us each week. One week God's love for you might ring loudest in a song. Another week you hear the voice of Christ speak directly to your heart in a familiar Scripture reading. For many it is the hymns of the liturgy – the Kyrie, Sanctus, Lamb of God or Song of Simeon – through which the voice of the Good Shepherd is heard.

The Good Shepherd is always speaking, but we are not always listening. The world is full of voices calling us to go their way. Our sinful flesh does not want to come and hear Christ's words. It does not want to follow the Good Shepherd. It wants to walk its own path, choose its own journey, decide its own future. When we realise we have been listening to other voices, the Good Shepherd calls us to walk the path of repentance for our sins, where He is waiting to abundantly forgive.

David knew how to repent. He let God's Law stand without excuse. He also trusted in God's love for sinners and His willingness to forgive those who come to Him with a broken heart and confess their sins. David believed in the Good Shepherd's earthly and eternal blessings, and he ran to take hold of them.

With confidence David can say: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

Even when the shadow of death comes, David trusts in God to rescue him. David trusts that God's love will not be abandoned him in life or in death. The Good Shepherd guides, protects and blesses us even in our dying.

Too often we think that a difficult path is a sign that God has abandoned us. Yet the opposite is true. God is nearest when we need Him the most. He uses troubles to show us the ways we have trusted in things other than Him. Trials are God's way of growing our faith, so we listen more intently to the voice of the Good Shepherd and hold onto His promises. As our trust in Him increases we face troubles with greater confidence in Christ to rescue us and bless us. Even death itself can't make us afraid, for Jesus has stripped it of its power in His resurrection.

And so, on the last day the Good Shepherd will return and call His flock from the grave and give us new life. In heaven there will be no more winding tracks, rocky paths or robbers. You will have arrived at your destination. You will enjoy eternal rest. Christ will host a feast more lavish than we can imagine. And there will be a place for you at the table. God will anoint you as His invited guest. No longer will you run to the Good Shepherd for protection from the enemies in this world. They will all have passed away, put in the place prepared from them.

But we should not think that God's heavenly blessings are only for the life to come. God's goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our life. Even when we face the greatest struggles of faith the Good Shepherd is there leading you to green pastures and still waters. The heavenly blessings of God are a present reality. God pursues you with His goodness and mercy all the days of your life.

Friends in Christ, life is a long journey that's too risky to travel on your own. Follow the Good Shepherd wherever He leads you. Listen for His voice. Cherish His Word. Stay close by His side, for He is with you. He is the only sure guide you have for this world, and the only one who has prepared a place for you in eternity. Amen.