

Easter 4 / Good Shepherd / May 3, 2020

1 Peter 2:24-25

“He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

The fourth Sunday of Easter is the Sunday of the Good Shepherd. Shepherds were part of the landscape in ancient Israel and in Galilee and Judea during Jesus’ life. Shepherds were family members, given the task of watching their parents’ flocks. Rachel watched her father Laban’s sheep. David watched his father’s sheep. Shepherds could be the owners themselves, if they were without children, or their children were not old enough for such a responsibility. Others were hired by owners to take care of their sheep. Being a shepherd wasn’t a high paying position, it probably paid nothing if you were a child, watching your parent’s sheep. Nevertheless, as is often the case, the lowest paying jobs are among the most important. Something we see today as truck drivers, grocery store and fast food workers are shown to be essential in a time of pandemic. Although the pay was low, shepherds were entrusted with a great responsibility in an agrarian society.

Although His earthly father was a carpenter, Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.” Jesus was identified with shepherds from His birth. The good news of His birth was announced by angels to shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks in the fields outside Bethlehem. Centuries before His birth, His human ancestor King David, began his career as a shepherd, caring for his father’s sheep; also in the fields outside Bethlehem. David wrote the most famous shepherd song, as he realized the Lord is the shepherd above all others. He sang, “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.” When Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd, He wasn’t saying He was a good worker, although He was the greatest worker. He wasn’t identifying Himself with the lowly in society in opposition to the higher classes, for He identified Himself with all humans. He wasn’t simply identifying Himself with David and expressing a claim on his throne, although He was both David’s Lord and heir. He was identifying Himself with God, for He is the Son of God from eternity. He is both our Lord and our Shepherd.

In David’s famous song to the Great Shepherd, he sings of how the Lord leads him to green pastures and still waters, provides for his needs of body and spirit The Lord protects him from enemies, self-inflicted harm and eternal death. He sings, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” A good shepherd would do many things for the sheep in his or her care. When David presented his credentials as a warrior to King Saul, he said he had fought lions and rescued sheep from the mouths of bears. He was so ferocious in his care for the sheep that if a predator didn’t back off, but rose against him, he would strike it and kill it! A good shepherd would risk his or her life for the sheep.

This fourth Sunday of Easter we remember Jesus is the good shepherd above all others. His devotion is so great that He lay down His life for the sheep. More than that He took His life up again, so that He would provide good things for His sheep in time and for eternity; forgiveness, peace with God and resurrection! Jesus is the Shepherd who leads us into the Father’s house that we may dwell in the presence of God in peace for eternity.

In our lesson St. Peter calls Jesus the “Shepherd and Overseer” of our souls. He writes, “For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” Peter was probably writing to congregations that had both Jewish and Gentile members. He would have remember that Jesus once said He had been sent to gather the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He would also have remembered how Jesus nevertheless answered the prayer of a Canaanite woman and healed her daughter from an unclean spirit. He was sent first, but not only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel! He would also have remembered Jesus saying, “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” Jesus is the shepherd of both Jew and Gentile. He went first to gather the lost sheep of the house of Israel that through them and with them, He might gather sheep from every people and all nations under heaven.

Jesus gathered to Himself a flock of believers. The book of Acts tells us that in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost the flocked numbered about one hundred and twenty. That very day it exploded to number more than three thousand! The flock increased in number daily, until a persecution arose and sent thousands of believers out of Jerusalem, back to the places from which they had come. The persecution probably didn’t seem like a good thing at the time. In fact, some people may have feared the flock would be dispersed and forever scattered. The great majority of the flock was dispersed from Jerusalem and scattered throughout the Roman world, but that was a good thing. Through the witness of the church dispersed and scattered, thousands more heard the good news of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus’ cross and became part of the flock through faith in His name.

That first flock of sheep gathered from among the house of Israel was the means through which the gospel came to the nations; people like you and I who are not Jewish by birth. The catalyst to go and share was the suffering of persecution. Because, rather than being weakened and discouraged in their faith, believers were strengthened and

encouraged through suffering hardship for the sake of their faith! They drew closer to the Lord and were made strong in His grace. And just like He said He would, the Lord gathered sheep from among the Gentiles. Even in suffering, persecution and hardship the Lord works good things and brings blessings to many souls. During this time of pandemic that's something for us to remember and reflect upon. The Good Shepherd watches over His flock, blesses it and adds to its numbers, even in times of hardship.

St. Peter writes, "For this is a gracious thing, when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly." These churches to whom St. Peter wrote were enduring hardship for the sake of their faith in Jesus and testimony to His name. It was an unjust suffering because they were not breaking any laws, divine or human. There is no blessing in suffering as a lawbreaker as Peter mentions, but there is blessing in suffering for the sake of Jesus' name. There is blessing in Jesus, even when our suffering is not caused by faith in His name. The blessing is to see Jesus more clearly, to realize our need for His grace more urgently, to cling more closely to Him, to speak more earnestly to Him in prayer and to feed more fully on His word. This grace is not something we earn from suffering, it is what Christ gives us in our suffering. Christ earned the grace of forgiveness, strength and peace through His suffering on the cross. He gives this grace freely as a gift of love.

In all the hardships, trials and struggles of life, believers have the comfort of knowing that we are not alone, or without hope. In Christ, God is with us. In Jesus we have been born again to a real and living hope through the forgiveness of sin. We may have no peace in the world, but in Jesus we always have peace with God! We may have many struggles in life, but we receive strength in all our struggles by looking to Jesus and considering what He went through to earn our forgiveness and achieve our salvation. St. Peter writes, "When He was reviled, He did not revile in return, when He suffered He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree that we might die to sins and live to righteousness."

The grace we receive is the knowledge that Jesus is with us in all things and that He uses all things, including sorrow and hardship, to draw us closer to His heart and to more fully convince us of His love and eternal purpose for our lives. The Good Shepherd leads us to green pastures and leads us through the valleys and shadows of life. His purpose ultimately, is to lead us through the valley and shadow of death and into the light of eternal life in His Father's house.

It was to that end the Good Shepherd lay down His life on the cross for our forgiveness and took His life up again for our eternal salvation. In the gospel of John, Jesus spoke of hirelings who would abandon the sheep and leave them to predators at the first sign of danger. A good shepherd would stand between the sheep and the predator, even as David did for the sheep in his care. Lions, wolves and bears met their match when they took on David, but doubtless there were other good shepherds, who were bested and paid with their lives for their dedication to the sheep. Jesus also paid with His life, but unlike even the best human shepherd, He was able to take His life up again, by the power of His divine being. By His death He defeated the greatest predators; sin, the devil and death. The cross testifies to the great love our Shepherd has for us; His devotion and dedication! His resurrection shows His power to protect, help and save the flock He has called to Himself.

Life is hard. Life is harder without Jesus. Jesus bore the burden of our sin on the cross. He helps us bear the burdens that are common to life because of sin. In the world, life is hard and then we die. Life is hard also for those who are in Christ Jesus, but in Jesus we have help in time and the promise of life in eternity. We have a good and faithful shepherd. He leads us along the paths of righteousness, in which we both receive blessing and become a blessing to others.

Our Shepherd nourishes us with His word as living bread, which a person may eat and live forever. He refreshes our spirits with the water of baptism, in which He satisfies our thirst for righteousness in the forgiveness of our sins and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. He prepares a table before us in the sacrament of His holy body and precious blood, under the forms of bread and wine; given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins and as a foretaste of the great feast in His Father's house at the fulfilment of time.

At all times, but especially during this time of isolation and separation, we draw near to Him in deep and earnest prayer. We listen to His voice speaking in scripture. We remember the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the promises of newness of life in time and for eternity, spoken in our baptism into His death and resurrection. Our Shepherd is faithful, forgiving, kind, tender hearted, wise and loving. He makes us lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside still waters. He restores our souls. He bids us come to Him! We draw near to Him in faith! He calls us to follow Him! He will lead us through all things and bring us to dwell in His Father's house forever. The Good Shepherd watch over us and keep us to that day. In His Name. Amen