

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fourth Sunday after Easter, May 6, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 200:1-4, 324:3, 200:5-8, 648, 51.

Lessons: Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10.

Sermon Text: John 10: 11-16.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

"O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker." (KJV) for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did." (NIV) (Psalm 95:6-9)

Today we find God's inspired Word leading us with the fact that

JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

- 1. He takes care of his sheep**
- 2. He knows his sheep**
- 3. He reaches out to people everywhere so that they may become his sheep**

Scripture teaches that *"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."* (Isaiah 53:6)

A retired farmer whose father raised sheep commented "where one goes, they all go", and "they go into places where they shouldn't be." Phillip Keller, a shepherd who wrote "A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23" wrote "It is no accident that God has chosen to call us sheep. The behavior of sheep and human beings is similar in many ways." He writes of sheep having perverse habits, stubbornness and stupidity. p. 21.

Later in his short well-written book, he further compares people to sheep: "Scripture points out that most of us are a stiff-necked and stubborn lot. We prefer to follow our own fancies and turn to our own ways. And this we do deliberately, repeatedly, even to our own disadvantage. There is something almost terrifying about the destructive self-determination of a human being. It is ... interlocked with personal pride and self-assertion. We insist we know what is best for us even though the disastrous results may be self-evident. Just as sheep will blindly, habitually, stupidly follow one another along the same little trails until they become ruts that erode into gigantic gullies, so we humans cling to the same habits that we have seen ruin other lives." p. 74.

Scripture frequently compares humans to sheep: We have wandered from the path God would have us walk on. We have strayed from the pastures he would have us live in. In fact, since Adam and Eve sinned and strayed from what God wanted them to do and enjoy, all mankind has been doing the same thing.

We recognize our sinfulness from the Law of God as summarized in the Ten Commandments. Today we look first at the shepherd upon whom the Lord laid the iniquity, the sin of all mankind.

Jesus gets right to the point: *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* Most of Jesus' listeners had experience with sheep. If they had not raised or cared for sheep, they knew someone who had, for sheep were creatures that played a great part in the economy of the Jews. A shepherd might be someone who lived primarily in the village and was either a full-time shepherd or he also worked at raising crops as well as sheep or goats. The shepherd had to be self-sufficient for days or weeks at a time while he was pasturing his sheep in out-of-the-way places.

For the protection of his sheep he needed his rod and staff, as pictured in our Old Testament lesson. The rod was a club a couple of feet long sometimes with a heavy knot at the end while the handle was a little thinner. This was a good weapon for the defense of his sheep against robbers or wild animals. The shepherd used his staff, a straight sapling about 6 or 7 feet long, tapered at one end. The staff used in Israel did not have a crook at the end as artwork often shows. The staff was used for a number of things: to guide his sheep, to knock down twigs and leaves from the trees for their food, and it could be used as a walking stick to help while climbing steep and rocky hillsides and treacherous ravines in search of food, water and safe shelter for his flock.

The shepherd also had a sling and a few smooth stones in his shepherd's bag for defense against marauders, animal or human. The sling was made up of long cords with a piece of leather, sort of a pocket fastened to it. Think of today's slingshots with which you may be familiar but take off the handle. Remember how David killed the giant Goliath with one stone from his sling?

The shepherd's bag also held his midday meal. He typically would carry something such as a hollowed-out gourd or some kind of a container with water to drink.

Jesus comes right to the point of telling us how important his sheep are to him. ***"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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."*** Jesus loves his sheep, the believers whom God has entrusted to his care. He also loves all mankind so much that he gave his life for all mankind. The good shepherd is contrasted with a hired man who doesn't care for the sheep. The hired man is just doing his job and it is no big deal to him if something bad happens to the sheep. Jesus gives the picture of a wolf coming to attack and steal and kill the sheep and what does the hireling do? He runs away, not really caring about the sheep. But Jesus is one who cares for his sheep.

Sheep were valuable, and a large flock very valuable. A good shepherd such as Jesus Christ would be ready to give his life for his sheep.

The Lord chose the dependence of sheep upon the shepherd to explain the relationship between his people and himself. Jesus, the Son of the Sovereign Lord ***"tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."*** (Isaiah 40:11)

Jesus assures us ***"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep."***

The believer, the contented sheep of Jesus Christ says ***"My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip-- he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."*** (Psalms 121:2-4) All his sheep say ***"Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel."*** (Psalms 80:1)

The sheepfold or the pen, where the sheep stayed at night, was sometimes a cave with a walled in area built in front with just one gate. Where caves were not available, the shepherd would build up a pen, usually with rock walls, because rocks were very common and available, often with a roofed portion at one end to protect the sheep from the weather. The sheep are kept in the pen with only one entrance. The shepherd is the one who has access through the gate to the sheep. Anyone finding another way in is up to no good, such as robbers and thieves. In a shared pen or fold, the watchman protecting the gate opens it for the shepherd. Because many flocks were often kept in the same sheep pen, the shepherd would call out for his sheep as he would lead them out in the morning. The sheep recognized the shepherd's voice as he called them by name and led them out. The shepherd knows each of his sheep by name. When the shepherd has called up all his own sheep he goes on ahead of them and they follow because they know his voice. But they will not follow a stranger. They fear strangers because they do not recognize the voice of strangers.

After leading his sheep out of the pen into the countryside, a good shepherd would always seek the best, safest meadow for his sheep. Sometimes a dangerous, winding path would be the only way to get there. He would seek out a place with good food and still waters, a gently flowing stream rather than a rushing torrent. He would want to rest his sheep in the shade. While they were resting the shepherd had to keep watch lest some wild animal or some thief seek to kill them or steal them.

At night the shepherd would lead his sheep back to the fold, the sheep pen. But at night, even though the sheep were safely in the pen, they still were not safe. The shepherd had to keep watch against wild animals such as wolves, or robbers.

We might expect the Jews to have some understanding at least of some of his figurative language. The sheep were God's chosen people. Strangers and thieves were those who would seek to harm and destroy and steal them. The shepherd was Jesus, sent by God to care for the flock. But many of the Jews didn't understand and just didn't believe what Jesus said to them and were not willing to admit that they themselves were among the strangers who were trying to lead the sheep astray.

Jesus was the way to reach the sheep. Many strangers came before the time of Jesus trying to steal his sheep. False prophets, false Christs came. They did not find Jesus in the Scriptures and point him out to others as the way of salvation. God's sheep would not listen to the thieves and robbers.

Anyone who comes through the gate, that is, who believes in Jesus, will be saved. He or she will come and go and be cared for. The thieves and robbers come to steal, kill, and destroy. The effect of false teaching is disastrous. The path of the Pharisees leads off a rocky cliff to eternal damnation. But Jesus came so that the sheep might have life and have it to the full. Jesus, the good shepherd, gives an eternal future to all his sheep. All who believe receive life from Jesus. They are HIS sheep.

Jesus is the Word, and all of God's Word reveals Jesus. So Jesus is the good Shepherd and the gate when we think of the Word through which Jesus comes to us and we to him and through which we receive nourishment for eternal life from him

Jesus, the Good Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep. He died so that the sheep might live, and live eternally.

He also tells us: ***"I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."***

Many thought that the Messiah would come only to save the Jews, but Jesus set them straight. The other sheep not of that sheep pen were the Gentiles who were also chosen by God from eternity.

Jesus' mission was to bring them too, along with the Jewish believers into his flock. This he did and continues to do by the power of his gospel in the Word and sacraments. His sheep everywhere hear his voice, his Word, and become one flock under the one shepherd.

The one flock is the holy Christian church, the sum total of all believers, which we will see in all its unity when it enters heaven with the Good Shepherd. For now, it is invisible to us, because true faith is in the hearts of people, and no human can see into the heart of another. Many today think Jesus is talking about one visible church, and thus many think that all churches should get together and be "one flock". But remember that this passage speaks of the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, what we call the invisible church.

Your shepherd knows you. How does he know you? He created you, He redeemed you. He called you to faith by the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. You are a true child of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

Yes, with the Psalmist we confess: ***"I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands."*** (Psalms 119:176) But the joyful fact is that our shepherd reaches out to us with his Word. There is nothing good in us, his sheep. He guides us, leads us, keeps us safe. Then, with the Psalmist, we will rejoice in heaven – and even on earth as we recognize all the blessings our shepherd gives us: ***"Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise."*** (Psalms 79:13) May we, Christ's sheep, show his praise daily, from generation to generation! Amen.