

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
[www.lutheranlccf.org](http://www.lutheranlccf.org)  
**Second Sunday after Easter, April 15, 2018**

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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,

This Sunday is sometimes called “Good Shepherd Sunday”. Jesus Christ is your Good Shepherd. Your shepherd looks after you and takes care of you because he is true God.

If any person living today were to claim to be true God, we should immediately recognize him as a false Christ, as an impostor. Christ makes it clear that he will come on the last day to judge the living and the dead and will appear in the heavens. He tells us “*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*” Mt. 25:31-32

Before Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead, he preserves and keeps his sheep, that is, all who believe in him safe. Because Jesus and the Father are one, one God, Jesus can plainly say that he is the shepherd of the sheep. He is the shepherd of his sheep.

Because I and probably most of you have no experience with sheep, it is helpful to look to people who have such experience. Scripture tells us a great deal about sheep and shepherds. We have not only examples in the Old Testament of God’s people who were shepherds but New Testament examples, too. We find in Scripture the plain truth that

**JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD**

- 1. Sheep need to be cared for, and**
- 2. Jesus takes care of 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) That shows us our sinfulness.

A farmer whose father raised sheep once told me “they go into places where they shouldn’t be” and “where one goes, they all go”. To learn more about sheep and shepherds, we can look to Phillip Keller, a shepherd who became a preacher and wrote a book called “A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23”. He 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 [we] 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.

Jesus tells us: ***“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*** Most of Jesus’ listeners had some experience with sheep. If they had not raised or cared for sheep, they knew someone who had, for sheep were important creatures in the lives 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 out in the pasture with his sheep.

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 knob 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 also used his staff, a straight stick about 6 or 7 feet long, tapered at one end. The staff usually 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 – we use the word ‘slingshot’ – 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 tells 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 love 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 asks ‘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 was very valuable. A good shepherd such as Jesus Christ would be ready to give his life for his sheep.

Scripture talks about how much the sheep are dependent upon the shepherd. Isaiah tells us that the Savior ***“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) The Good Shepherd does not sleep on the job and he’s on the job 24/7. 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, 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 thieves. In a shared pen, the watchman protecting the gate opens it for the shepherd. Because several 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 all his own sheep he goes on ahead of them and they follow because they know his voice. They fear and will not follow 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 totally safe. The shepherd had to keep watch against wild animals and human predators.

We might expect the Jews to have some understanding at least of some of Jesus' 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.

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

Any sheep who comes through the gate, that is, who by the working of the Holy Spirit has come to believe in Jesus, will be saved. He and she will be cared for. Thieves and robbers come to steal, kill, and destroy. The effect of false teaching is disastrous. The path of unbelievers leads off a rocky cliff to eternal damnation. But Jesus came so that the sheep might have life and have it to the fullest. Jesus, the good shepherd, gives an eternal future to all his sheep. All who believe receive life from Jesus. They are his sheep.

All of God's Word reveals Jesus and Jesus is the Word. So Jesus is the good Shepherd and the gate when we think of the Word through which Jesus comes to us and we come to eternal life through him. Jesus and his Word, the Bible, is the way to eternal life. 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 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 they are the 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 here talking about one visible church on earth, 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, and 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.