

**The Good Shepherd!**  
**15 May Anno Domini 2011**  
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***“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11-18)***

Of all the images of Jesus the Scriptures give us, the most gentle and comforting one is today’s - the Good Shepherd. The old Latin name for Good Shepherd Sunday was Misericordias Domini - *the merciful heart of the Lord*. David, the shepherd who became king, wrote that wonderful psalm by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” We sang as sheep of the Good Shepherd just moments ago in our sermon hymn. Maybe some of you remember another little song from your childhood, you’ll sing that one in just a bit:

I am Jesus’ little lamb  
Ever glad at heart I am  
For my Shepherd gently guides me  
Knows my need and well provides me  
Loves me every day the same  
Even calls me by my name.  
(LBS #740)

The image of sheep walking with their shepherd is not exactly our day to day experience here in Salem is it? Our pasture lands lay mostly outside of town with the exception of Bush Park which still boasts of having public grazing rights. But most of what was once usable pastures are now paved over with concrete and asphalt. You still find sheep grazing out in Aumsville and Turner. But even so, they don’t resemble a Middle Eastern shepherd with his flock. You need to think more along the lines of how it is with you and with your family pet, which will be a little bit closer to the merciful heart of the Good Shepherd than any modern sheep herding operation.

The Good Shepherd literally lays down his life for the sheep. They are his life. He brings them out to green pasture. He leads them to fresh pools of water. He sets them upright when they’ve fallen down and can’t pick themselves up. He leads them along well-worn paths, through places sheep generally don’t want to go, the dark valleys where predators abound. Where the good shepherd leads, the sheep will follow in trust. He feeds them, anoints their wounds and sores, cares for them, even pampers them. And at night, after the flock is safely tucked in their pen, the good shepherd lays down at the entrance to become the door. If anyone wants to get to the sheep, they’ll have to get through the good shepherd first.

A shepherd is not a hired hand, who runs off at the first sign of danger. For the hired hand, it’s only a job and a paycheck. But the shepherd lives for his sheep. They are his own, like a family. He defends them. He calls each of his sheep by their name, as we do with our pets, and they hear his voice and follow only that voice and no one else’s. That’s what Jesus is for us. The Good Shepherd who laid down His life in order to save us.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a shepherd’s town, the birthplace of His ancestor David, the shepherd-king of Israel. The first to worship Him were shepherds from Bethlehem’s field. Though Jesus grew up in a carpenter’s house, shepherding was His true vocation. When Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd,” He is identifying Himself with Yahweh, David’s Good Shepherd God.

To say Jesus is our good shepherd is also to say that ***“we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.”*** That will prove troublesome for our egos. While it’s nice to think of Jesus as our shepherd, we might desire something a bit more flattering for ourselves than the image of a sheep. Sheep are stubborn, often mean, prone to wandering. Isaiah says, ***“All we like sheep have gone astray, everyone has turned to his own way.”*** We don’t like to stay close to the flock.

Many fellow pastors share the frustration of how believers are so prone to wandering. (Pastor, by the way, means shepherd; that makes a congregation a flock.) One of the greatest frustrations of pastoral work is the constant wandering. Shepherds have sheep dogs whose job it is constantly to circle the flock, keeping the strays in line. I guess that makes the elders the sheep dogs of the congregation. Pastors need this reminder that shepherding involves a lot of chasing after strays and lost sheep and also driving away the wolves who wander into the flock and try to devour it.

We are prone to wandering. We'll drink from any putrid, polluted pool that promises refreshment - religions, philosophies, self-help fads. We'll sample any weed in the pasture that looks tasty, no matter how poisonous it might be. We'll wander off on our own, thinking we can do it alone. The American breed of sheep is particularly prone to wandering. We are, after all, the nation that admires rugged individualism - the Marlboro man sitting high atop his trusty steed, the self-made man, the single mom who does it all by herself. We admire that, we even validate it, just me and God, thank you very much. Who needs a congregation or a pastor, or even people when you can do it all by yourself and dial direct and get all the religion you want off the radio, the internet or TV? Remember, the lone sheep, the isolated Christian, is easy pickings for the wolves. And they are out there. Even worse they are in here, in our synod, touting self help, Purpose Driven Life, rugged individualism, decision theology of how I can do something to save myself.

All this waywardness comes from the original sin of wanting to be gods in place of God and sticking our hand into the middle of the garden to pluck fruit that brought death instead of life. You and I have that same inborn tendency that manifests itself in our spiritual restlessness, our boredom at the Good Shepherd's table, our continual flock hopping from one church to another, our itch for the novel and exciting programs over the well-worn ruts of righteousness and God given worship.

Left to our own we'd be dead sheep, devoured by the wolves. Had the Son of God not joined the flock by becoming man, we would be doomed by our own sin and death. But this is the very heart of the merciful God, the Good Shepherd. He became one of us. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the way a shepherd dwells among his flock. God didn't sit there on a throne in heaven saying, "They sure look lost; I hope they find me." Yahweh, the Good Shepherd, joined the flock. "*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,*" He said through the prophet Ezekiel. God didn't leave shepherding His people to hired hands. He sent His Son Jesus, to seek and save the lost, to gather the scattered, to be the good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.

In His death on the cross, He did just that. He laid down His life for a world of lost sheep. Lifted up on the cross, He drew all to Himself, gathering the sinful damned humanity into the embrace of a loving shepherd arms. God was willing to suffer and die to save the ungrateful, the undeserving, the unthankful retched sin filled masses called humanity and that includes you and me.

You are sheep of the crucified and risen Good Shepherd. He pastures you in the green pastures of His Word; He leads you to the quiet waters of Baptism; He restores your soul, He raises you from death to life in Him. He guides you in the paths of righteousness, the way of repentance, daily dying and rising, for His name's sake. Even though you walk every day through the dark valley called the "Shadow of Death," where threats to your life are all around you, where death and the grave loom large over you, you need fear no evil. The Good Shepherd Jesus has gone ahead of you through suffering and death to resurrection and glory. Your Shepherd lives and in Him you shall live too. The grave couldn't hold Him, and it will not hold you either.

He is with you, comforting you with His Word and presence. He prepares a table for you in the presence of your enemies the world, the meal of His sacrifice, His own Body and Blood which He offered up once for all to pay for your sins, He gives you as food and drink on the banquet table of His altar. Nothing can harm you in His presence. "***There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.***"

He anoints your head with healing oil, forgiving your sin, in general and in specific, in a corporate way and in a private, a personal way. I see here a nice image of personal confession and absolution. A shepherd will give the sheep a flea bath, like a corporate absolution. But he will also apply a healing balm to the troublesome sores and spots that could easily become infected if left unattended. You are forgiven in general, all the sins with which

you have ever offended God, and also in specific, those sins that trouble you the most. That's why we must never let private confession fall into disuse as our forefathers did. Forgiveness, like sin itself, is both general and specific.

At the end of this day, and at the end of your days, you can say with David, "***surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.***" Like a couple of sheep dogs nipping at your heels, our Lord's goodness and mercy will dog you each and every day of your life, reminding you that the Lord is your Shepherd and you are His sheep. And at the end of it all, there is a promise held in trust that is as sure as Jesus crucified and risen from the dead: You shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. For all your sins are forgiven by the blood of the Good Shepherd who laid His life down for His sheep. For in Christ Jesus all yours sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. For Jesus sake and in Jesus name, Amen and amen!

*The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN!*

*Please rise for the offertory.*