

A Shepherd for Dirty, Rotten Sheep

4th Sun. of Easter – 05/08/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Psalm 23:1-6 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 1 “**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want**”.

Introduction

✘ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✘ Whew! It smells like sheep in here! I guess that makes sense, since you and I just sang the song where each of us admit, “*I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb*”.

✘ And since we admit and confess that we are all a bunch of sheep, then no image of our LORD, and His relationship with us, strikes closer to our core than the image we see in today’s Scripture Readings: the image of the LORD as our Shepherd and we as His sheep.

→ I just read it in the Psalm for today, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (v. 1). We heard it in the Epistle Reading, “The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd...” (Rev. 7:17). And in the Gospel Reading Jesus tells us, “My sheep hear My voice...” (Jn. 10:27).

I. Our myths about sheep...and the truth.

✘ Why is it, that this image holds such power for us? Perhaps it is because, in a world filled with as much trouble and trepidation as ours, the idea of sheep and shepherds together, out in a green pasture paints the picture of peace and quiet. Our text even says in verse two, “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters”. When our day; our lives have been especially long and hard, we long for a time when we can “lie down” in peace and rest by our Shepherd.

→ Or maybe we like this image because of the way that we think of sheep. There’s a reason that things like sheepskin-lined slippers or thick, woolen socks when we’re on the couch under a sheepskin blanket on a cold winter night paints the picture of coziness and comfort for so many people. The wool is soft and clean and fresh. If the wool is like that, then surely the animal that gave it must be the same, right? Soft and gentle; clean and fresh; without fierce teeth or sharp claws. It’s a warm and cozy picture to think of Jesus as our Shepherd, and we as His sheep.

✘ That makes me laugh, because if only more of us actually knew how sheep really are, we might feel a bit more sheepish about ourselves! Laura Ingalls Wilder brings that fact home in her book *Farmer Boy*. The chapter called “Sheep Shearing” describes the process of taking the wool from the sheep. The first thing is to give each sheep a thorough washing.

→ You see, all that thick, soft wool acts as a magnet, gathering a whole lot of dirt as the sheep picks it up day after day. What we think of, and see, as clean and soft starts out as filthy and muddy. Once the sheep have been scrubbed, they must then be sheared immediately, because if they aren’t, it only takes a moment and they will be dirty all over again.

✘ And I’ve learned from those who have tended sheep, that they have a number of additional unpleasant characteristics. Sheep, by nature are prone to wander from the flock. It matters not what the grass is like beneath their feet. It’s the sight of green grass “over there”, when it catches their attention, that they can’t resist. So they wander until they find themselves far away. Sheep can also be stubborn, headstrong, willful...and many shepherders even say “stupid” creatures.

II. We’re Dirty, wandering, Stubborn Sheep

- ⊗ Well, you and I, we are God's sheep; God's flock. And just like sheep out in the field, we Christians – living out among the filth of this sin-filled world – have an amazing ability to pick up a great amount of "dirt" from our surroundings.
 - ➔ There's a reason that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:33, "Bad company ruins good morals" and why good Christian parents are so concerned about what kind of friends their children make. We've all seen it – not only in others, but if we're honest we've seen it in our own lives. How often have our thoughts and words and actions been influenced so they end up reflecting those of our non-Christian neighbors!
 - ➔ We may not be able to avoid passing through the valley of the shadow of death, but when we begin to walk like those around us who are spiritually dead, we are flirting with a sort of death that is our own making – and we should be very much afraid!
- ⊗ Frankly folks, when we humbly and honestly look at ourselves in the light of God's Law, what do we see there? We see all of the filth and mess in our lives! Instead of delighting in the blessed "oil" of grace that the Lord pours over our head – and partaking of the many good things He pours to "overflowing" in our cups – we covet the luxuries of this world; always wanting greener pastures, bigger lawns, houses that are better appointed than the Lord's (in a "better" part of town no-less), valuing the boss's praise and our friends' envy well above God's goodness and mercy.
 - ➔ Instead of trusting God to vindicate us for living and speaking according to His ways in the presence of our enemies, we fear them, smear them, speak all kinds of evil against them, and gloat when we see them stumble. Isn't it true? Every time we gather for worship in the Divine Service, as soon as the name of God and His forgiveness is placed upon us, we find that we must confess even more of our sins.
- ⊗ Yes, we – God's sheep, also have a tendency to wander. Perhaps something hurtful is said to us, maybe even by the people of God. Or we experience some horrible, shocking event – a sudden death that we can't possibly explain in our understanding of a loving God, or rejection by a loved one that doesn't make sense when we've tried so hard to remain committed and faithful. Or maybe we catch sight of greener grass just over the next ridge – those worldly goods that draw us away, a catchier sounding philosophy or religion than what our Shepherd gives us in His Word.
 - ➔ And so we wander from God's house. We become angry with Him; lose faith in Him; lose confidence that His clear and simple Word and Sacrament are the richest table anyone could ever spread before us. And the next thing we know, months or even years have gone by, and we find ourselves alone, without Him, maybe without the dear ones He has given us.
- ⊗ Isaiah 53:6 says it best, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way". What – you and me stubborn? Sadly, yes. When things don't go our way, often far too quickly, we respond by digging in our heels and forcing others to drag us along. Instead of praying, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we pray, "My will be done in heaven and on earth – or else!"

III. The Shepherd became a Lamb to Save Us

- ⊗ Yes, we are sheep: dirty, lost, stubborn, sinful sheep. And so serious is our problem that God had to take a radical step to solve it. The Lord; the Shepherd of Israel, took on flesh and became the perfect Lamb of sacrifice.
 - ➔ Did you hear the words of John in our Epistle Reading, "The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd" (Rev. 7:17). Yes, Jesus is "the Lamb of God", John 1:29 says, "who

takes away the sin of the world". He came in our flesh to be sacrificed in our place and He took away the filth and grime of our sin by washing us clean in His own pure blood.

→ And when we wandered and became lost; without hope and without God in the world, He searched and He found us far from His heavenly home. His search took Him to a lowly virgin in Nazareth; to a humble cave in Bethlehem, and finally, on a dark Friday afternoon, He went to an accursed tree. It's there, on the cross, that He conquered our willfulness by yielding His own will to that of His Father, all the way to His own death. Freely, willingly, lovingly He offered Himself up for us all, in sacrificial love to the Father.

✘ Today, on Mother's Day, we thank the LORD for the gift of His love to us, shown and expressed and lived out in and through the person of our mothers. Theirs is a unique, sacrificial, and constant love. I know, as I remember my own mother today, even as she is wrapped in the loving, eternal arms of Jesus in Paradise, that her love for me never seemed to waver!

→ Even as she watched me throw a baseball through the picture window, filling our living room with shards of glass, she still loved me. And yes, I know now that she even loved me as she and my father told me I was grounded for a week after that, and I was forced to watch my friends play outside for seven straight days through the new picture window that was installed.

→ Even when I lied to her countless times about wrongs I had done, or when I treated her with disrespect by willfully disobeying her, or when I called and woke her and my father up at 3:00am from the County Jail one time because I needed them to come and get me after I had been picked up for a DUI – even then, her love for me was an unstinting love – that's a love that is unmeasurable, excessively generous and without bounds!

✘ Well, where do you think mothers learn to love like that? As much as our world likes to think of our mothers as some kind of superheroes, the truth is they don't come upon their "superpowers" on their own. They learn them and they receive them from the true superhero, the only One whose love is perfectly unstinted – the LORD God Himself; the One who is their Shepherd, just as He is the Shepherd of us all.

✘ In fact, as I looked again at verses 2 and 4 in Psalm 23 this week, I saw something I haven't seen there before. It's what I have chosen to call the "Three P's of our Shepherd's Unstinting Love".

→ The first is our Shepherd's unstinting gift of provision. "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters". A full belly and a quenched thirst – if a sheep has those two things, it thinks, "I shall not want" for anything more. We all sang earlier that the LORD, our Shepherd, "knows my need and well provides me" (LSB #740, v.1) with "food, drink, clothing...house, home...money, goods..." (Small Catechism, pg. 258) and all that I need for this life and the next.

→ The second "P" is the Shepherd's unstinting gift of presence in verse four. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me". Jesus promised in Matthew 28:20, "I am with you always, to the end of the age". In the Gospel Reading today, Jesus adds an especially comforting tone to that promise when He says of His sheep, "No one will snatch them out of My hand" (Jn. 10:28).

→ And the third "P" is the Shepherd's unstinting promise of protection. At the end of verse four, "...Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me". A good shepherd needs no more of a weapon to fend off and protect his sheep from any and all predators than His rod. And with His staff He is able to pull those sheep that have become entangled in thick brush or have fallen into a crevice up and out to safety. Likewise Jesus, through the "rod and staff" of His grace and truth protects you and me from the snarling teeth of Satan who "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking...to

devour” us (1 Pet. 5:8), as well as the traps of our own sinful nature and the corrupt world around us every day.

✘ Yes, with His resurrection that we celebrate now in the midst of the Easter season, the Lamb of sacrifice has become our Shepherd. He feeds us in the pasture of his Word. He leads us beside the still, deep waters of Baptism where He gives us life itself. He satisfies our hunger by giving us the heavenly bread and the cup of life in His own body and blood. And in faith, we see that our cup “overflows” with eternal blessing when He feeds us His gifts and we drink of His love and grace.

➔ He knows each of us as well as any good shepherd knows his own sheep. And the amazing thing is – He still loves us; still feeds us; still leads and guides us through all the perilous ways of this life.

✘ Yes, the Shepherd became a Lamb to save us dirty, rotten, wandering sheep.

➔ Little by little, as we feed on His love and stay with His flock, He breaks the old willfulness and stubbornness within us. He makes us His servants, who fear and love and trust in Him above all things; His servants, who learn to give not only our wool but also, if necessary, our own skin for the needs of others.

Conclusion

✘ When we come together here, each Lord’s Day, we come together, dear sheep, as His flock. And as our Shepherd, He speaks, and we listen. He leads, and we follow. And all the while we have His promise that He will keep on leading until that day when we sing His praise in glory and He wipes away every tear from our eyes.

➔ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* Amen.