

# Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 22, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."* - John 10:11

Jesus' words are good words for us to hear and take to heart, Jesus is the good shepherd. Your good shepherd. He lays down His life for the sheep. He lays down His life for you. In world that is marked more by the valley of the shadow of death, than it is by green pastures and still waters, what we need, more than anything is a good shepherd. A shepherd we can trust to lead us through valley of the shadow of death. A shepherd we can trust to never run away when the trials and tribulations of this world bare their fangs; whom we can trust to find us no matter how far we wander; whom we can trust to lay down His life, and even more importantly, to take it up again so that we may indeed find quiet pasture, still water, and with it a table laden with the best bread and cups of wine that overflow. That's the shepherd we need. That's the shepherd Jesus is.

The Scriptures love to use the image of sheep and shepherds. The Old Testament is filled with illustrations of God as the shepherd and His people as the sheep.

Sometimes the image is good. Like in the Twenty-third Psalm, *"The Lord is my shepherd..."* Or the Psalm 95, which the Church has used in her morning prayers for two millennia, *"O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand."* Yet sometimes the image is not so flattering to the sheep. The prophet Isaiah cries out, *"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way."*

Some of God's greatest heroes have been shepherds: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were shepherds, Gideon was a shepherd, and of course there is David who is called from taking care of his father's flock so that the prophet Samuel might anoint him king over Israel. It was the shepherds who were among the first to see the Lord in flesh and blood on the night of His birth.

Being removed from the times of the Bible, and from shepherding like we are it's easy for us to think that shepherding is a nice idyllic stroll through green fields while happy sheep frolic around us. It's because of our being so removed from it that we miss the counterintuitive-ness of the metaphor. See, shepherds, especially in Palestine, have a hard life. These are rough men. They're out in the elements all day long, and sometimes all night too. They smell of sweat, and dirt, and well, sheep - wet sheep mixed with body odor, which won't be a winning cologne combination anytime soon. They are dirty, they are coarse, they're near the bottom of the socio-economic pile. And that's why it's so odd that God stands there and calls Himself a shepherd. Because almost everything shepherds are is not what we see in nice painting of Jesus with pure white lambs in pristine pastures. And then there are the sheep. Some people tell me sheep are smart. Some people tell me sheep are dumb. Which is fine, either way, because it makes the metaphor all the better. After all, have you met people. The great thing about people is even the smart one's can be utterly dumb, and the dumbest ones can be amazingly brilliant. But there are other things about sheep. They don't really pay too much attention to where they're going. They just wander along chewing what's in front of them. Which in the verdant pastures of England and Ireland is not a huge a problem at all, there's grass everywhere. But Palestine is the edge of the desert. So the good land, the verdant, productive land is not used for sheep. No, you use the cliffs, canyons, scrubland, and rocky hillsides for the sheep. The grass grows more in clumps than fields, and the sheep just wander from clump to clump paying attention to the food and not too much else. Which is why they can wander off, and get lost.

And a lost sheep is pretty much a dead sheep. Aside from their wool, outside of the flock sheep don't have all that much in the way of natural defenses. They're faster than you and me, but they can't outrun a wolf, or a lion.

And then there is their disposition. They're stubborn. If they get stuck they don't back up, they just keep trying to go forward - which just gets them more stuck.

Oh, and did I mention they smell? And those fluffy white coats, they don't happen naturally. Their wool gets full of dirt and dust, and burrs, and bugs.

All of which is why even if shepherd seems an odd description for the Almighty God, sheep is kind of an insulting, but appropriate description for human beings. Stubborn, smelly, willful, blind to their own dangers, and unable to defend themselves from their natural predators... from sin and death and the devil.

And that of course is the real heart of the matter. In the face of the things from which we need the most protection we are indeed nothing more than sheep. Like sheep looking only at that next delicious clump of grass temptation leads us into sin, and down into the ravine and by the time we look up to see where we are, we are lost and trapped out on a ledge, or worse falling further down the ravine.

What Isaiah says is true, *"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way."* For what we find is that we have a tendency to follow our noses, our appetites, our desires, our hearts, even our minds, into dark places. Places where the devil can easily whisper us into despair. Because it doesn't take much to point out that we are trapped because of our sin, and from there it takes even less to persuade us that the shepherd isn't going to come for us.

But that's a lie. Because we have a shepherd who is good. Jesus Christ is the good shepherd. He is the shepherd who will leave the other 99 in the fold and come to find you.

But He's more than that, because part of what makes this shepherd good. Part of what makes Him better than any hired-hand, is that He has by the mercy of God made Himself into a sheep like us.

It can be easy to miss this point, but it's vital for us, because a shepherd who has become a sheep can think like both of them. There's no way you can get so lost that He can't find you - He's been tempted just like you. Because He has become one of us, He can also comfort us in the midst of the storms of life- because He knows our fears, He knows our hearts, He knows us.

But this shepherd become the sheep is different from other sheep. Because He doesn't run away from the wolf. He runs at the wolf. He allows Himself even to be eaten. To be eaten so that you and I are not eaten. To be eaten, and death finds that what it has eaten is not just some sheep, it's the shepherd.

See just as we have predators, our predators have a foe - the Shepherd. And what happens when the predator eats the shepherd thinking He's a sheep? The shepherd can fight Him from the inside out. And that is what happened in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Death took a body from the cross, only to discover that it had eaten God. Death took body only to find life suddenly shining forth from within the grave. The wolf ate the sheep, only to find the shepherd stabbing him through the heart with the pointed end of His staff.

And that, brothers and sisters is the greatest news of all. It's not just that the Lord is our shepherd, or that He leads us to green pastures and still waters. It's that He is the Good Shepherd when and where you need Him the most, in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. *"Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death."* Yea, though death comes for me. Yea, though death devours me. Yea, though death come for those I love. Yea, though death devours them.

*"Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death,"* I will fear no evil. Not sin, not death, not the devil. Not anything. For the Good Shepherd is with me, with you, with His flock.

*"I will fear no evil for Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff comfort me."* They comfort me because it's the same rod, the same staff by which He stabbed death in the heart, and bludgeoned the devil into submission.

I will not even fear sin, for this Shepherd has become a sheep and taken my sin and gone into this Valley ahead of me, so that He could slay what would devour me, and come out again and lead me.

This is what the Good Shepherd, your Shepherd, Jesus, does. The truth of the matter is He has conquered the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and as terrifying as it is, you have no need to be afraid, for it is His and He enters it with you so that He may lead you through it and out to the other side.

Because that's thing about valleys, even deadly ones. There's a way in and at other end a way out. And what you will find on the other side of this valley is nothing less than the House of the Lord. And there you will find prepared for you safe pasture, a table overflowing with food and drink, and shelter in the Lord's House forever.

And until then? Until then, know this, you have a good shepherd, the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen one. He knows you by name, and everyday He will lead out of the fold and into green pastures and to still waters. He will give you what you need to restore your soul, and He will lead you down the right paths - because that is what a good shepherd does.

When you start to wander away, He will call you back. When you get yourself lost, He will find you. Because He is the Good Shepherd; your Good Shepherd.

No matter how lost you get, no matter how often you wander away this shepherd He will call you by name and take you back into His fold. Because He is the Good Shepherd; your Good Shepherd.

And when the day comes that Death comes for you, have no fear, do not despair. The Good Shepherd will call You by name and lead You safely through. And safely through You will go following where He has trod, because that is what a good shepherd, your Good Shepherd, *The Good Shepherd* does.

He leads you safely through from this life into new life, where you and I and the whole flock of God will dwell in the House of the Lord our whole life long, for forever.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia! Amen!