

“The Good Shepherd – What Picture Do You Have of Him?”
John 10:11-18, Easter 4-B, April 26, 2015

Have you ever done it? Taken a concept like the “Good Shepherd” and typed it into the GOOGLE SEARCH engine on your computer. That’s what I did this past Wednesday and to my complete surprise I was immediately able to access some 29,300,000 websites about the Good Shepherd.

While I didn’t get to look at all of them, the 40 or 50 web sites that I did click on so often brought to my attention various artists’ renditions of the Good Shepherd that have been painted throughout the centuries. So often, the artist capture Jesus’ presence as the Good Shepherd with our Lord standing in the middle of a large grassy field, or maybe even on a hillside. There Jesus is standing in his long white robe. His beard is immaculately trimmed. In his right hand he is holding his Shepherd’s staff and in his left arm he is holding a “baby sheep;” that’s right, a lamb!

Perhaps it is exactly from such soft images of our Savior, that we tend to think of our Savior here in terms of the “Meek and Mild Jesus.” We have a tendency to romanticize the whole metaphor here in our minds. And this is not all bad, for certainly we do get these depictions from the 23rd Psalm and other places. But is this really the picture that Jesus is giving us in the words of our Gospel lesson today?

Here Jesus is not in the presence of his friends and those who had come to believe in him, but Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, the “separatists,” for that is what the word ‘Pharisees’ actually means! They often were considered to be the religious elite among the Jewish people in Jesus’ day. And most of them were probably some very well intentioned people. They devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the keeping of God’s law. But in doing so, as more wealthy people also, because your average, every day fellow Jew would not have had the kind of free time in his or her schedule that it would have taken to become a Pharisee, they also had a tendency to look down their noses rather judgmentally at the people around them.

These people were Jesus’ adversaries. They were always looking for way to discredit him and to undermine him and for ways to trip him up in his words in their attempts to turn his followers away from them.

In these words of our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is speaking about his own impending crucifixion upon the cross. **“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep!”** And here we are reminded that as the sun was setting, the shepherd called out to his sheep, who knew him by name, and followed him to the sheep pen, where he would usher them into this enclosure, this stone wall about four feet high, that had an opening for a door, with no real door or gate attached to it! Once the sheep were safely inside, he would literally lay down his life across the door way, so that no predators could get to the sheep without going through him first.

But Jesus knew the day was coming when he would lay down his life in an even much greater way, when he would lay down his life for us on that Old Rugged Cross where the dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain!

Then Jesus contrasts his care for the sheep versus that of many Palestinian shepherds who were “hired hands,” who were paid a salary to attend to the needs of the sheep, but when push came to shove, when the hour of danger arrived, most of them were probably far more interested in their own self-preservation than they were interested in anything else.

Most parents would do most anything for their child, but not necessarily for just any other child. There is a bond of affection that is there that makes all of the difference in the world. “Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!” You get the idea, I am talking about here, I am sure!

Christians believe that Jesus in coming into this world to live a perfect life for us and to fulfill the law in our stead, and to offer himself as a sacrifice for our sins, did so to ransom us from our three greatest enemies, spiritually speaking that is, from sin, death and the power of the devil.

Paul says to the Corinthians, **“You are not your own! You were bought with a price! Therefore glorify God in your bodies!” (I Corinthians 6:19)**

St Peter reminds us that he ransomed us not with perishable things like silver and gold, but with his holy precious blood and his innocent sufferings and death, all that we might be his own and live with him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns unto all eternity!

Thirdly Jesus says he knows us! *“I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep!”*

Here Jesus is talking about our knowing him intimately! That was the special relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. The recognized his voice, and when he called out to them at the end of the day, even though they as a flock could have intermingled with other sheep from other flocks, when he called them by name, they came to him!

Yesterday, Mount Olive was the host for the Lutheran Women’s Missionary Zone Rally; ladies from other churches in our state were invited here to Columbia to celebrate the joy of our Savior’s resurrection, and to study the Word of God together, to pray, and to fellowship, by enjoying a wonderful salad luncheon together.

The theme of the Rally was: “Grow in Faith,” and I had an opportunity to speak in the sermon yesterday about some of the ways that God calls us to grow in our faith. One end result of our growing in faith is in realizing that our ministry should not be limited to other people who are already like us, but also to people who are as different from us, it may seem, at times, as the man in the moon.

After the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension to the Father’s right hand, after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, now become apostles that first Pentecost Sunday, they eventually came to realize that the Gospel was not to just be shared with other Jewish people, but with the whole world.

In Acts 10, we read the story of how a man who was a Roman Centurion, who was living in Caesarea, was what the book of Acts calls a “God-Fearer!” For all practical purposes he was a convert to the Old Testament faith. He did everything to become a Jew except to submit to the rite of circumcision, which alone would have made him a full-fledged member of the people of Israel. Yes, there were Gentile converts to Judaism in that Old Testament era too!

But he has a vision that God told him to send some messengers to Joppa where Peter was hanging out in those days, to go and ask Peter to come back with them to Caesarea where Cornelius was living. And before this happens, Peter has a dream too, of a gigantic sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, all filled with all sorts of foods that Jewish people had never been allowed to eat before this. He hears the Lord say: “Arise, kill and eat!” But Peter objects. “Lord, I have never eaten that which is unclean!” The Lord responds, “Don’t declare that which I have made clean as still being unclean!”

God was cancelling his restrictions on the kinds of foods that Israel was forbidden from eating as part of that “Holiness Code” that would have kept them separated from the rest of the unbelieving world! But now that Jesus had come, and died, and was raised from the dead, those dietary restrictions no longer applied!”

To make a long story short, Peter stands up and makes a glorious declaration because of a great epiphany that has now been given to him: “Truly, I now perceive that God shows no partiality, but gladly receives people of every nation who fear him and who do what is right!” (Acts 10:34)

Then Peter baptizes Cornelius and his whole household. I imagine there were children in that household. And nowhere does it say anything about Peter only baptizing the children who had reached to “age of reason,” or some such other nonsense like that. The same thing is true with Paul baptizing the jailer’s whole household, who was the jailer in Philippi, Acts 16.

Do you hear what Jesus is saying: ***“I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will list to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life for the sheep!”***

St. John is reminding us in that second lesson that once we have grown up in the faith, and by the grace of God really matured in the faith, we will eventually take on a shepherding role ourselves too. “By this we know love that he laid down his life for the brothers!

We may be like Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and actually be asked to die for our faith in being faithful to our Good Shepherd. But John is talking about another way of fulfilling a shepherding role too. ***“If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? “Little children let us not love in word or talk, but with deeds and in truth!”***

Sheep are not the brightest animals in God’s world. Sheep can get lost so easily. Sheep have a tendency to wander and to put themselves in all sorts of precarious situations. We need the voice of the Good Shepherd to still speak to us today.

Did you hear that news reports on television this past week on those morning news programs, maybe on the Today Show, or CBS Morning Program, or Good Morning America—about a whole pack of coyotes that have made their way into New York City and even into Manhattan? The longer they are there the more brazen they become. There was the news report about a man who was out walking his dog, and he was attacked by one of these coyotes in the early morning hours, requiring the man to have 8 or 9 stitches in his leg!

They are not extremely fierce animals but they do have some sharp teeth. But sheep are defenseless. They have no sharp teeth or fangs. They have no devastating claws that they could use to rip the flesh of another predator apart! They have no poisonous venom like serpents and even bumble bees and honey bees when you stop and think about it!

We need the protection of our Good Shepherd.

So I came across a silly story about a policeman who was out patrolling the city when he in his police car ran up against another car where there was a driver, but oddly enough, there was a sheep sitting on the right hand side of the front seat of that car on the passenger’s side. Both the man and the sheep were wearing seat belts to be sure. But the police thought the sheep could be a major distraction for other motorists on the road. He pulled the man over and said, “The front seat of a car is no place for a sheep! You’d better take that sheep down to the zoo!”

One week later the same office saw this man and his sheep out on the road again, but this time they were wearing sunglasses! The policeman pulled the man over and said to him, “Hey, Mister, I thought I told you to take that sheep down to the zoo!”

The man said, “We did go down to the zoo and we enjoyed it so much that today we thought we head over to Myrtle Beach!”

Yes, I know, it’s one of those silly little stories, but here is the testimony of a man who went somewhere and enjoyed it so much that he wanted to go somewhere else that he could enjoy to that same degree. And that is always might hope as we are gathered here to worship our Triune God Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. That when you leave you will leave with your faith strengthened, and your love made stronger for God and one another. That you will enjoy our time together here so much, that you can’t wait to come here again!

Why? Because the Risen Christ is here and here to you he has made himself known! “Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. My cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of the Lord and I will live in the house of the Lord forever!”

“How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord, of hosts! My soul longs, yes even faints for the courts of the Lord, for a day in your house is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper at the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of the unrighteous!” (Psalm 84) Amen