

How do you sum up, in one image, all that the Lord Jesus has accomplished by His death and resurrection? Jesus Himself condenses all His work into the picture of the Good Shepherd. Important for understanding this is what is meant by the word “good.” “Good” is often thought of as the opposite of “bad,” and is easily equated with “nice.” This fits with the popular presentation of Jesus; above all things, He’s nice. He is the guy who romps around the field with sheep, always smiles, never says “No,” winks at sin, and just wants everyone else to be like Him - nice. The problem is that this popular presentation is nowhere near the Jesus of the Bible, who called sinners to repentance and cared so much about the holiness of His Father’s house that He drove those who profaned it out with a whip, and who insisted on Himself as the Truth.

No, “nice” is not the sense of the word “good” that Jesus uses here. There is a Greek word for that. But our Lord uses a different word. This word has the sense of “right,” or “fitting,” “meets the high standard.” Jesus is the true Shepherd, the only one that can do the job that needs to be done. So what is it that He does that makes Him the true, the right, and fitting Shepherd? Jesus tells us: “**The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.**” He is the true Shepherd because rather than fleece the sheep for His own benefit, rather than slaughter them to fill His belly, rather than run away when met by a pack of wolves and save His own skin, this Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep.

He lays down not just His biological existence, His heartbeat and drawing of breath, but His entire self. He bears the iniquity from all the wandering of the sheep, carries all their burdens and sins as His own and suffers for them. “**He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree**” St. Peter says in today’s Epistle. And as we heard from the prophet Isaiah on Good Friday, the very end of his prophecy of the Suffering Servant, Isaiah says of the Messiah that “**he poured out his soul to death.**” This is not just saying that the Messiah dies, that His physical life ends, but that He offers His entire self. His soul bears the judgment of condemnation. On the cross He suffers all the wrath for sin and undergoes total separation from God. And He does this on behalf of His sheep. “**All we like sheep have gone astray.**” And all your iniquity is laid on Him. He suffers it, is fleeced and roasted in wrath in your place.

Here you see how Jesus is the true Shepherd. He is the only one who can do this. And He has done this. Here you see how you are able to pray those beloved words of Psalm 23, to say with confidence what the Lord does for you. He makes you lie down in green pastures, leads you beside still waters, restores your soul, comforts you and gives you bountiful provision. And above all, you shall dwell in His own house forever. All is true and promised you because He has ensured it at His own expense. God’s promises of goodness and mercy, the forgiveness of your sins, and eternal salvation, are guaranteed to you not because God is nice, some kindly doting grandfather, but because Jesus has laid down His life for you and taken it up again.

Here you see the steadfast love of the Lord. You see how it is that Jesus loves and cares for you. You see how He would have you know Him. He is not always what we would call “nice.” He does not always put on a happy face, tell you to always look on the bright side of things, keep the sunny side up. He endures a real cross. His suffering and death shows sin to be the horrible thing that it is. He shows the consequence of calling God a liar by false teaching and turning from His Word as He suffers for man’s disobedience. But in so doing, He atones for it. He shows that through His death for His sheep, not even death can keep you. This is the true, the Good Shepherd.

If it is not about the Shepherd who has done all this, then you know it is a false and lying voice that comes from one who in all truth cares nothing for you. Those voices are out there. There are hirelings who care nothing for your eternal wellbeing. They will speak lies to get people to like them. They will make things up or speak on the basis of their opinions, rather than the written voice of the Shepherd.

And when it is the Good Shepherd who is preached to you, when it is all about the Son laying down His life and taking it up again on your behalf, there you hear the voice that you know. That is what Christians recognize. Even in the midst of this life’s uncertainties. As much as we do well to heed the advice and expertise of epidemiologists and directors of health, as duty bound as we are by the Fourth Commandment to honor and obey civil authorities, above all things, we heed the voice of our Good Shepherd, who has accomplished our greatest need, what no one else could do for us, what we cannot do for ourselves.

His speaking, His giving, His leading you through the still waters of Baptism to the succulent pasture of His Holy Sacrament, is what you need. This is what the ranting unbelievers cannot understand about how our hearts rejoice that we can soon gather here with no limitations. They do not realize, even we ourselves struggle to believe that this is where the Lord drives us. He uses the perils of this life and the assaults of the devil as His staff, to press you to what you truly need. To drive you to this place. To teach you to cry and bleat out your fears and pain to He whose mouth was silent in His own trials. Thus you see how He gathers you, brings you in and keeps you in His flock.

It is not always easy. If you look at the artwork on today's bulletin, the sheep's eyes look weary. I suspect there are very few here who are not weary. But so also the Lord's face, the eyes downcast, shows the burden He bears. For He, the true and fitting Shepherd, bears all that you yourself suffer as His own. As we sang in Lent, "The wrath and stripes are hard to bear, but by [Christ's] passion they will share the fruit of [His] salvation." And so we will sing today:

To pastures green, Lord, safely guide,
To restful waters lead me;
Your table well for me provide,
Your wounded hand now feed me.
Though weary, sinful, sick, and weak,
Refuge in You alone I seek,
To share Your cup of healing.