

Sermon for Easter 3 Misericordias Domini Sunday – John 10:11-16

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Our Lord teaches us what it means that He is the Good Shepherd. In the parable of the lost sheep, the good shepherd leaves that ninety-nine in the safety of their pen. Then he goes out and searches for the lost one. He goes out in the scorching summer heat that lingers hot and heavy on the desert trails and in the cliffs, sweltering heat that lasts long into the night. He goes out during the winter when the rain and snow beats down on his face and causes his hands and ears to freeze because it's so cold.

The point is that one of his sheep is lost. It happens so easily with sheep: they go their own way, the Prophet Isaiah says. They venture far out into the wilderness, out to the cliffs. They get stuck between stones or caught in thorny bushes on the heights. The shepherd hears their anxious bleating. He makes his way along the ledges. Finally he reaches his sheep. He lays it across his shoulders. He carries it home.

This is precisely what Jesus, our Good Shepherd, does for us. Each and every one of us wants to go our own way. We're preoccupied with ourselves. We worry about our livelihood and that God will not provide for us. We believe we know best how to get by. We dishonor our confirmation vows. We leave and try to make our own way. Everything is fine for a while. Sheep don't understand the risks, sometimes not even when it's too late. What do sheep know about steep cliffs? What do they care about lack of good pastureland and water? What do they understand about filling themselves with deceitful food that will not sustain life? What do they realize about wolves prowling about, seeking whom they may devour?

Things are difficult in this world. There is much that disturbs and distracts us. There is much that confuses us and draws us away from our Shepherd. And yet, the Shepherd comes. He enters among us and speaks. Every Lord's Day, through His under-shepherds, through His pastors, Christ speaks His forgiveness to you: "In the stead and by the command of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." This Word of God points us not to ourselves and how we can fix things, but to Him where everything we need is found. His own words let us know Him as He is: "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."

In various ways, we feel His strong hand picking us up. Maybe it's his staff trying to get a good grip to free us from the sins we've tangled ourselves into. Both sheep and men have only one thought in the situation of being trapped: to get free. We don't want to be grabbed or lifted. We jerk and twist out of the Shepherd's grasp. We slide even further down the slope. This is the Shepherd's greatest disappointment and sorrow that weighs heaviest on His heart: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"

Christ Jesus is the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. He wants what's best for us. Our Lord speaks about His work as Shepherd. Not only that, His passion shows it.

The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He took upon Himself the long journey in the heat and the cold, the betrayal, the false accusations, the mockery, the denial, the spitting, the beating, the scourging, the whipping, the crown of thorns, the nails, the cross, the separation from God. It wasn't easy for Him. The cup of suffering, both for soul and body – He emptied it to the bottom; He drained it to the dregs. He did it for us. He did it to seek us when we're lost. His love for us moved Him to do it. He gave His life for us, for each and every single one of us. It was for you who are hearing this that He died. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep, for you, but He also takes it up again. For the Shepherd did not stay dead – He rose to new life and lives forever.

And the Living Shepherd doesn't overlook us. He knows His own. As the Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father, so our Lord knows us. He knows we belong to Him. He knows we believe in Him. He know us not just in general, but He knows when we're strong or weak, or sick or well. He sees our temptations and dangers. He sees our tears. He knows that our consciences accuse us. Everything is known to Him. It is precisely us who are sinful and lost that He comes to save. He seeks, leads, feeds, watches, remembers, and carries us individually, as necessary, in testing and comfort, in adversity and kindness.

He fights and conquers the wolf, the one who comes to steal, slaughter, and destroy. He spares us from the hired hand. He continues to look for us when we go astray. Even when we try to fight Him and escape from His loving arms, even when we're unwilling and spiteful, He rescues us. This is the best place to be. Why? Because to be lifted up in His arms is to be carried through all dangers.

So allow things to happen in another way. The way Peter describes: "For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." Take courage! Entrust yourself to Him! This is the mark of His sheep, that they hear His voice. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

In all of Scripture, there simply is no more well-known passage on us as God's sheep and Christ being our Good Shepherd than the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." We walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but we walk being led by our Good Shepherd. He feeds us and leads us to the eternal house of the Lord. I tell you, today these words are fulfilled in our midst. So gather us now, Good Shepherd, around your table, that we may be one flock. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠