

Wandering Sheep, Good Shepherd

Text: 1 Peter 2:21-25

Hymn: Enter Hymn here

*For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd
and Overseer of your souls.
1 Peter 2:25*

What a beautiful picture! The picture Good Shepherd Sunday puts in all our heads—of Jesus as shepherd, the Good Shepherd, gently holding, nurturing, protecting a gentle little lamb. We like this picture of sheep and shepherds...until we dig a little deeper and realize who is who.

Jesus is the shepherd, of course. We are the sheep. You don't have to do much study with regard to sheep to realize how fitting a picture this is of the life of a Christian. Sheep are not very bright. Sheep need to be led or they will die. Sheep fall down and can't get up. Sheep are afraid of everything, even their own shadow. Sheep have even been known to drown in a rainstorm, because they feel something hitting them and they look up and forget to look back down.

That's right. We are the sheep. And Jesus is the Shepherd. But Jesus isn't just any old shepherd. God's Word teaches us that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. What does it mean that Jesus is the Good Shepherd? He's not an average shepherd. He's not a run-of-the-mill shepherd. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, lays down his life for the sheep. Unheard of! But that's what our Shepherd does!

From our epistle reading for today, from 1 Peter 2:21-25, "He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree." This is what Jesus did. He took the sins that we commit and for which we bear guilt and He bore them. He paid the penalty for them. "We all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and

the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is 53:6). The great exchange. The Good Shepherd not only loves and cares for and nurtures his sheep. The Good Shepherd dies for his sheep. And three days later, the Good Shepherd picks up His life again for the sheep. Everything Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is and does, He is and does *for us*.

There's a word picture in our reading for today with regard to the sheep. And it, too, is very apt. "For you were straying like sheep." That's what sheep do. They stray. They wander. They drift off. Why? Because they get preoccupied. "Oh, look at that little piece of paper rolling across the pasture. I think I'll follow it!" "Look at that butterfly. Isn't it pretty? I think I'll catch up to it." "What was that noise? I'm getting out of here." And when sheep wander away from the protection of their shepherd, they become vulnerable. They become vulnerable to all kinds of evil things that would seek to steal or devour or otherwise consume them.

And so what does the shepherd do? The shepherd has to go and seek and find and often times rescue and even defend with his life the sheep against the adversaries, especially the evil wolves and wolf-like creatures that are out there. Such is the life of a sheep and a shepherd. Sheep wander. Shepherds feed and guide and protect.

We don't have to think about our lives very long to see how we have wandered away from our Good Shepherd. We Christians, the baptized, are the sheep. And we wander. We wander away from the protection of our Good Shepherd when we forget to go to church, where God promises to be, where He promises to feed us, with the Word and Sacrament, the green pastures and the quiet waters. We wander and we stray when we start chasing after every gimmick and fad that promises to give us spiritual joy and fulfillment even though the voices are not the voices of the Good Shepherd—don't

even mention Him!—but are the voices of a false shepherd seeking to devour us.

We wander when we think we know more than our shepherd. We know the right path. We know the safe place to lie down, to eat, to drink, to sleep. We cut ourselves off from the protection and the voice of the Good Shepherd and we become vulnerable. To whom? The devil, who is seeking whom he may devour like a roaring lion. Whom does the devil seek to devour? You. Your soul. Your life.

And so God gives us this picture. Wandering sheep and a Good Shepherd. “But you were straying like sheep but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.” God’s cry throughout the Old Testament, through the prophets and even through the first prophet of the New Testament, John the Baptist, remains the same: “Return to me.” “Return to me,” God says to straying sheep like you and me.

This past Palm Sunday, as has been the tradition for several years now, we welcomed another class of confirmands into communicant membership. These Palm Sundays are always bittersweet for us pastors. Because we know the sad reality that experience has taught us. Some of the children we see on confirmation day we will never see again. Never. And it breaks our heart. It breaks our heart. Not so this year! In what I consider an Easter miracle, for the first time, we have seen a 100% return rate for this year’s class—the entire class has been in church every Sunday since Palm Sunday. Unprecedented! But many of these wandering sheep each year are just following their wandering parents. And that breaks our hearts even more.

A few years ago, one of my pastor friends shared with me the point he made at his church’s confirmation service. He faced the confirmands and said,

Confirmands, it’s this simple: Get out your daily planner for the rest of your life and on every Sunday mark, ‘Go to church.’ It’s that simple. It’s not rocket

science. Every week has a Sunday. Go to church. For as long as you live, there'll be a Sunday in every week. Go to church.

And when he told me that, I thought, "Why didn't I think of that?" It is so simple and so true and so contrary to our world, which would rather do anything and everything but devote an hour or two to being in God's house each week; some—and I, if I live to 100, I still won't understand this—some would rather run marathons than go to church!

Fellow sheep, when we cut ourselves off from the voice and the protection of the Good Shepherd, we become vulnerable. We become easy prey to the devil and the way the devil works through the world and our own sinful flesh. We need to cling to the Word of God, even though the world and our old Adam is telling us that anything and everything is more important.

God's Word reminds us: "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed." To conform ourselves to the Good Shepherd is a slow, often painful task, where each and every day we live out our baptism; we die with our sins, our desires, our idols, and then rise a new creation in Christ, confirmed in that baptismal grace, and tomorrow we do it all over again. This is how God forms and shapes us into the likeness of Christ. We fight it. We go kicking and screaming into that repentance and forgiveness. Yet this is the call of the Good Shepherd.

"For to this you have been called," St. Peter says. Called to this *what?* To this *suffering*. The whole letter of 1 Peter is written to Christians who are suffering for the faith. If you want to avoid suffering in your life, suffering for Christ, the best advice I can give you is to leave the church. The devil already has you in that case and doesn't have to persecute you as a sheep any more. Wander off and keep on wandering. But if you

listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, if you hear His voice and return to Him, the devil, the world, and your flesh will never stop attacking you. Not until the day you die.

But when these attacks come, we look to the example of Jesus. We're tempted to wander away when suffering comes. And yet there is no better, no safer place to be than in the hands of the Good Shepherd, out of which no one and no thing can snatch us. He Himself promises that. And He Himself is the example of the One who walked with God, even though it meant suffering, and reached the end victorious, glorious, with life, abundant life, and joy eternal.

God calls us not only to bear our crosses of suffering but also to holiness. He calls us to keep His commandments. Here, too, Christ is our example. "Neither was deceit found in his mouth." God calls us to speak the truth and to speak the truth in love. "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return." How countercultural is that! When somebody offends us, we can't wait to hit send on that e-mail or facebook post, because we have to get ours in. "When He suffered He did not threaten." We're all good at threatening: "If you say that, do that one more time, then I—" But Jesus continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. He did not need to justify Himself. And neither do we. Christ has already justified us with His holy, precious blood. So when attacks and suffering and unjust criticism come, bite your lip. Humble yourselves. Pray to God for strength, strength to continue to trust in the arms of the Good Shepherd. He will never leave you. He will never forsake you. He is with you to the end of the age.

Admiral Horatio Nelson was perhaps Britain's most decorated naval hero, a household name as a result of his victories at sea in the Napoleonic Wars. During a

bitter campaign in the West Indies, in which Nelson chased a fleet double the size of his own, a ranking sailor wrote in a letter: “We are half-starved, and otherwise inconvenienced by being so long out of port. But our reward is that we are with Nelson!”¹

Brothers and sisters, heeding Christ’s voice and following His example will not always be easy. Who knows what challenges lie ahead, what schemes the devil has to destroy us, what persecutions this Christ-hating and Christian-hating world has in store for us? But, come what may, we have our reward. And our reward is that we are with Jesus, our Good Shepherd, now and always!

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¹ Conrad, Joseph. *The Mirror of the Sea*. Methuen, 1907, p. 291.