

The Shepherd That Is Good

Text: John 10:11-16

Hymn: "The King of Love My Shepherd Is" (*LSB* 709)

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Said no actual shepherd ever. Shepherds to be good must be first and foremost present and ready for work. How can Jesus be a good shepherd if he defines his goodness as laying down his life for the sheep? A dead shepherd is no good for the sheep.

As it happens, there are more meanings than one for the word "good." English has just the one word, but other languages have more. When Jesus said that He was the good shepherd, He didn't mean that he was good at shepherding. He didn't say, "I am the skillful shepherd. I am better than all the other shepherds in town. I am a winner of the shepherd-of-the-year competition." Instead good is a reference to his character: I am "the shepherd that is good," not "the shepherd good at shepherding."

The same word was used in other contexts to mean noble. There was a whole genre of literature in the ancient Greek-speaking world that related the lives and deaths of heroes and a common feature of that literature was to describe the death of the hero as a noble death. The Gospel of Luke comes closest to that tradition in portraying for us our Lord's death on the Cross in those terms—dying with dignity, fully in control of oneself, not afraid, magnanimous.

But when Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd," He is speaking of more than being noble. He is describing Himself as the one who is thoroughly and primarily good. What is Jesus like? We can say all kinds of things about Jesus, but fundamentally Jesus defines Himself as good. Just as when we ask, What is God like? And we can

say all sorts of sophisticated, Latinate things: God is omnipotent, omniscient, ubiquitous, eternal, immutable. But when Scripture sums up God's character, it does so with the simplest of sentences: God is love. And Jesus is good. If you forget all else, even when dementia strikes, God is love. And Jesus is good.

And He shepherds according to His character. Every shepherd, whether we use that word literally or metaphorically, is involved in an exchange of goods and services. Why does the shepherd take such good care of His sheep? Ultimately because He wants the wool and he wants that wool to be of good quality. A little bit later, though, he wants the meat from the sheep. While the going is good, while the shepherd is content to collect wool for the sheep, it's a pretty good deal for the sheep, but in the end there is a price to pay and that is the sheep's blood.

You can extend the metaphor from literal shepherding to nearly every other kind of shepherding, even the kind of shepherding you receive from me and the man over there. We are your pastors. "Pastor" is just Latin for shepherd. What's going on with us? Well, and I say this at the risk of ruining this year's pledge campaign, but there is an exchange of goods and services. We care for you, better or worse depending on how things are, and you pay us. If you stop paying us, we will have to leave town. We hope to be good shepherds, but if our families can't afford food and clothes and shelter, we just won't be able to give you our time. The same goes for our faculty and staff and for all of you in your employments. This is how shepherding works in the world.

But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, works in a different way. There is no exchange of goods and services. There is simply a bestowing of goods and services. The traffic is all one way. The shepherd cares for the sheep so the sheep may be cared for. And

that is the end of the story. Jesus will not fleece you, literally or metaphorically. And He will not consume your flesh, literally or metaphorically.

It's actually the other way around. This is the one occasion where the shepherd is fleeced and where the shepherd is eaten by the sheep. This shepherd gives us Himself. He allowed His skin to be destroyed, literally, for your sins, to be scourged, to be pierced. He allowed Himself to be attacked and to be destroyed so that you might live. He had nothing to gain from it except you and it is you that He wanted. He was willing to pay the price so that His flock might be intact and that His flock might grow. You once were wandering and lost, like a sheep without a shepherd, just as Ezekiel's Israel was, scattered into the four winds in various exiles, Babylon and other places. Because of their sins, God had scattered them. And they were suffering the consequences of their sins. But God promised that He would gather them and that He himself would be their shepherd. The shepherds they had had in the meantime had been unreliable. They had failed to care for the sheep and the sheep were now scattered. And now God says, "Enough of that! I will be their shepherd. I will lead them. I will feed them. I will bring them to good pasture."

And this is what Jesus was telling his disciples, who were part of these people of God according to the Old Covenant. It was in Jesus Christ that God was gathering Israel to be His people, removing their iniquity, so that they might be wholeheartedly His. And so that it might be a sure and guaranteed arrangement, God undertook all the work Himself. Different cultures have variations of a proverbial saying that goes, "Send a child on an errand and you'll end up doing it yourself." You ask your six-year-old to go and tidy up his room. Guess what you're going to be doing in a few minutes?

We are God's children and if God sent us on His errand, if He said, "You go sort yourselves out and come back and show Me when you're done," there would be much left to be done. And so that there would be no doubt about the completion of this covenant, God's own Son came into the world. *He* took the blame, the faults, and all the sin of Israel on His shoulders and thereby restored Israel to God's favor— wholeheartedly and without ifs, ands, or maybes.

Jesus goes on to say that He has other sheep also. They are not of this fold. He's talking about us! With a few exceptions among us, we are not offspring and descendants of Abraham. We are not Jews by birth. None of our ancestors were members of the twelve tribes. But we are still Jesus' sheep. He has brought us to the same promises, to the same blessings, the same grace, the same favor of God that God had promised His chosen people Israel. We are now partakers of those same promises. How? "They will listen to my voice." They will hear the voice and they will recognize and listen to it. This isn't just a passive receiving of sound waves into the ears. It means you hear and you heed and then you act on what you hear. What St. James says in terms of not being hearers only but *doers of the Word*. How are we doers of the Word? We hear it and *believe* it. Paul calls it the obedience of faith. We hear and believe it. And we live it! By honoring God and using His name in prayer, by setting the Sabbath day apart to gather with God's people and hear His Word, by honoring our parents, by helping one another in physical ways, by reserving sexual intimacy for marriage, by protecting what God has given to others, by defending our neighbor's reputation, by not resenting what God has given others but rejoicing in what He has given them and us.

When you think about it, the life of the Christian, both the repentance and the faith and the new obedience, are just different aspects of trusting in God's love and the goodness of Jesus. When Jesus leads us away from our own desires and from how we would like to lead our lives to knowing and obeying God's will and God's revelation of what is true and good and beautiful for us, we are simply following our shepherd's call—the *Good Shepherd's* call. We are all here today because we have heard the voice of Jesus. He has called us and we have heeded. And so long as we continue to hear the voice of that same Good Shepherd, we are safe. That is how the flock stays together. It stays together when it stays with the shepherd.

You are one with Christ. Christ is one with the Father. Who is there to overpower them? Who is there to accuse you when the Father and the Son speak for you? Who is there to condemn you when Jesus has already extended His goodness to you in your Baptism? "There is therefore no condemnation for us who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). Rejoice that your shepherd was killed. Rejoice all the more that He came back to life. He laid down his life and He took it up again. And He dedicates His life, His unquenchable, all-powerful life to you here on earth and to all eternity that no one may overpower you or condemn you or destroy you.

Stay with the shepherd. Heed his voice. Gather with the flock. Do not let the devil or your own desires or laziness or whatever else it is, drive a wedge between you and Him who is your life. In despair and in hope, when things are going for you and when things are going against you, there is no condemnation. There is only God who is love and Jesus who is good.

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