



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Christ has Risen....He is risen Indeed. Alleluia

One of the most common and popular images of Jesus is that of a Good Shepherd. This image has dominated Christian art for more than two thousand years. Our home church, St. Olaf in Rubicon, WI has a beautiful stained-glass window with Jesus holding a lamb gently in his arms. I am sure that many of you have seen such an image in churches you have attended and can probably close your eyes and envision that picture of Jesus, the shepherd today.

That image of Jesus as a Good Shepherd is caring, inviting, and personal. The image resonates with our desire for a vibrant relationship with God. And so, it was with King David and the song he wrote, Psalm 23.

John Stott in his book, The Contemporary Christian wrote on page 284, "There is an old story about a tour group in Israel. The tour guide had been explaining to the group about the close relationship a shepherd has with his sheep, and how he is able to walk in front of the, call them, perhaps whistle, or play a pipe, and they will follow him. During the tour, the group came upon a shepherd. They spotted a man in the distance driving a small flock of sheep with a rather menacing stick. Was the guide mistaken? The guide immediately stopped the bus and rushed off across the field. A few minutes later he returned, his face beaming. He announced, 'I have just spoken to the man. Ladies and gentlemen, he is not the shepherd. He is in fact, the butcher!'"

All kidding aside, we usually think of a shepherd as a loving, caring person taking good care of the sheep. On the other hand, we really dislike the image of us being the sheep or the

idea of being totally under another's protection and command. So, let's think for a minute about whether or not we need to have a shepherd.

Years ago, when Leigh Grace was in middle school, she loved to play softball. Rodney and I were of course her greatest fans as we regularly sat in the stands to cheer her on. One particular day, we sat next to another couple with a daughter on the team and much to our surprise they were yelling at the ump behind home plate and angry that the coach did not play their daughter. Pretty soon their negativism rubbed off on us and we too were noticing the coach's mistakes in play calling and the umpire's outright bad calls. Our girls ending up losing the game and the coach even admonished us for not supporting the team. You see we were influenced by the other couple. They actually stole our joy of watching Leigh play her favorite sport. We had let them take a beautiful day and turn it into a miserable one, one in which we came away ashamed of our behavior.

Today, we only need to turn on the TV nightly news to hear about people being angry over someone rolling a ball on their property and shooting a young girl and her father. Or horrified at a man shooting a young boy through a closed door who rang his doorbell not realizing he was at the wrong house. Other people are angry over a move a president or governor makes or laws enacted. Some people, like our brother-in-law, are still angry over COVID -19 taking away the life of a loved one. Folks, it is so easy to let those around us influence us and take away our joy and replace it with worry, anger, or revenge. It is the work of the devil that continues to wiggle his way into our lives to gain control. As our Scripture text today concludes, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." We need a good shepherd. We need Jesus, who comes that we may have life and have it abundantly.

Even Adam and Eve fell to the ways of the devil. That serpent in the garden took Paradise away from them. They had everything they could ever have wanted: a perfect wife, a perfect husband, (boy would that be nice!) plenty of good food, their entire existence was perfect, yet the devil was able to convince them that they needed more. The devil was miserable and so he wanted Adam and Eve to be miserable too! He could not stand to see the first people of God's creation so very happy. And that has not changed today. Satan is always ready to pounce when he sees an opening.

I know as Lutherans we do not talk about the devil very often, but he is a real and present danger to each and every one of us. And so, our need for a good shepherd is evident even as far back as the fall of Adam and Eve.

The Good Shepherd protects his sheep, guides them, and feeds them personally. He calls them by name and leads them. He is their protector so that they might have life and have it abundantly. It is a simple, metaphor that packs a truth that we all need God. We need Him to find greener pastures. Now that is not to say that we will always have it easy. But there is a freedom in having a shepherd. Freedom comes from a trust in the shepherd that He will lead us to that abundant life, a life with joy and void of worry. Now I am not saying that if you follow Jesus, you will never be in a place of hurt or discontentment and that

everything will be perfect, but I do believe that Jesus will be with us as our Good Shepherd when walk through such dark times.

Our 1 Peter reading suggests that even doing the right things does not guarantee that one will not experience difficulties, hardship, rejection or even suffering. However, we can endure, when we let Jesus walk with us just as he carried our sins to the cross and died for our salvation.

Jesus, our Good Shepherd deserves and seeks a relationship with us even after what he endured for our sake on the cross. I don't want to get into the works righteousness discussion, but it is good to remember that trying to follow Jesus moves us in the right direction. It does not earn us a bright and joyful future. That is the work that was done on the cross for us. What I do know is that when we follow Jesus, we are on the right path. We are moving in the right direction. We can have the help of our shepherd to fend off the plots of the devil that try to get us to deny Christ.

Faith in our God is our only hope of securing for ourselves the grace of God that leads to abundance and peace. We hear His voice, and he will lead us into green pastures. We were called at our baptism by name and God never forgets the action he took for each one of us at that baptismal font. We are claimed as His own and so we trust God to lead us to the perfect destination, where we will be guests of honor of the Good Shepherd. AMEN

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AMEN