

I am the good Shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

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In Jesus' day, it would have been startling to hear Him, who so many thought of as a wonder-working Rabbi, or at least the son of a carpenter, to identify Himself as a shepherd. Even though the Patriarchs; Abraham, Issac, and Jacob, owned countless flocks, even though King David and a couple of the prophets had been shepherd boys, by the time of Jesus' day shepherding was seen as a blue-collar occupation. Although the economy and religion of ancient Israel relied heavily on shepherding, it was considered an occupation beneath fishing or carpentry. Jesus says, *I am the Good Shepherd, the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep*. Given the context of their culture, those gathered around Him listening could have easily misunderstood Him. They would have understood the scriptural connections He was making with shepherding, even the subtle reference to King David, who was also a shepherd, but it would have been unthinkable for a shepherd to sacrifice His life for the weakest and most helpless of domesticated creatures, the sheep.

This week, we shift from the Resurrection narratives in the Gospel to a revelation of who Jesus is. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, and today, He reveals Himself to be the Good Shepherd. He is the Good Shepherd in a literal sense, especially after Resurrection, during the 40 days of Easter, when the Disciples of Jesus are as *Lost Sheep*. He proved Himself to be the Good Shepherd and He goes out to gather in His sheep, His disciples, that have been scattered. The prophet Zechariah foretold all this centuries before, *strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered*. The Scriptures have been fulfilled and now the risen Christ goes out to seek His lost sheep, to seek His lost disciples, and to seek us!

The Prophets had much to say of the Good Shepherd. Isaiah and Ezekiel explain to us that a *good shepherd* is not just a hireling, but the *good shepherd* is one who buys the ground, fences in and protects the fold, and tends to the lambs. Jesus also tells us that the *good shepherd* is the one who leaves *the ninety and nine* sheep and goes after even one little lamb that has gone astray. The *good shepherd* keeps and preserves His fold from all harm. Jesus calls Himself *the Good Shepherd*. He has bought the ground and fenced in the fold with His own blood, He tends to the lambs, he watches over all His sheep and has a vested interest in them. But He goes one step further and He says, *I lay my life down for the sheep*. But this

Gospel passage is so mundane, so normal, that we often do not hear what Jesus is saying. We hear, *I am the Good Shepherd*, and then perhaps think to the 23rd Psalm, *the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*. We overlook the fact that Jesus is calling us His sheep, among the most helpless and defenseless of creatures in the animal kingdom, but when we consider our own helplessness to avoid sin that should be no great revelation. Jesus helps us to understand His death and resurrection to us by saying *I lay my life down for the sheep*. Those hearing Jesus say I am the Good Shepherd, the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep, and listening with worldly ears, would consider that foolish. But it points to the great humility of Jesus. The humility of Jesus is that He is *God in the flesh*, who dies for us and lays in a grave for our sinful humanity. And even though we are often so unworthy of His great sacrifice for us, even though we lose sight of our Good Shepherd and wander away from Him countless times, yet Jesus comes looking for us. He wants to find us. He knows when we fall into sin and spiritually wander astray. Jesus is indeed *our Good Shepherd*.

We are the flock of the Good Shepherd, and yet we too are called to be shepherds, as we hear this morning in our Collect for the day, we are to *daily endeavor ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life*. We too must take that dose of humility and follow our Lord in serving the sheep and the church He has so painstakingly purchased and hedged in and tended to. Jesus has found us. He comes to wash and cleanse us of our sins and return us to His sheepfold. And now, He intends for us to do the same. We must imitate the Good Shepherd. We find in the Imitation of Christ encouragement to follow Jesus in this sacrificial humility, Jesus says, *No one who follows me will ever walk in darkness (jn. 8:12) These words of our Lord counsel all to walk in His footsteps. If you want to see clearly and avoid blindness of heart, it is His virtues you must imitate. Christ's teaching surpasses that of all the Saints. But to find this Spiritual nourishment you must seek to have the Spirit of Christ. It is because we lack this Spirit that so often we listen to the Gospel without really hearing it*. We as Christians are expected not just to follow our Lord and to imitate His life, but also to possess the Spirit of Christ, to have the spirit of Christ-like humility, the spirit of Jesus *the Good Shepherd*. Without the Holy Spirit we will not have hearts open to hear the Gospel with our spiritual ears. Without the Holy Spirit opening our ears to the words of the Gospel, we are the lambs who *err and stray* from the fold of Christ.

After Jesus' death and Resurrection, we read that He goes and seeks out His disciples. He appears and reappears in their midst, He shows them the wounds in

His hands, His feet, and His side, and He breaths on them that they may receive the Holy Spirit. He ordains His disciples to go and be shepherds, and He calls us to go and be shepherds, to be shepherds of His Church, to be shepherds of our families and make our families little churches for His sake. Our Lord has not just invested in a sheep farm, He has not just bought and fenced in and tended the sheep for the business venture, but He serves them and sacrifices Himself for His sheep, and He calls us to do the same. Likewise, we must not just focus on the worldly side of shepherding. We must be like Christ and not get bogged down in the price of the ground or the price of the fencing or the time needed to tend to the sheep.

We tell ourselves, probably even in this very moment, we are none perfect, we are only human, God cannot really expect this of us. But this is where the Holy Spirit comes in. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us. He longs to bring Christ the Word of God, Jesus the Good Shepherd into our hearts and souls. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus the Good Shepherd, through the Word that He is, longs to lead us into His Way, His Truth, and His Life. He longs also to fill us with His Body and His Blood so that we can continue faithful sheep to Him as our *Good Shepherd*. He gives us the spiritual nourishment that enables us to follow our *Good Shepherd*, to hear His voice, and be united to Him. Amen.