

Easter 4 - Good Shepherd Sunday – Year B
May 3, 2009
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
John 10:11-18
Pastor Paul Horn

Your Good Shepherd Laid Down His Life for You, His Sheep

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Lately, there’s been a lot of talk about swine and pigs. Let’s set all that aside for a moment and talk about another farm animal: sheep. Unlike pigs, sheep are cute and fluffy, woolly and white as snow. Sheep decorate the walls of children’s bedroom. While these innocent icons are associated with all things lovable, the life of a sheep is not always fluffy and cute...

Four years ago there was a tragic story out of Istanbul: Hundreds of sheep followed their leader off a cliff in eastern Turkey, plunging to their deaths this week while shepherds looked on in dismay. Four hundred sheep fell 15 meters to their deaths in a ravine in Van province near Iran but broke the fall of another 1100 animals who survived, newspaper reports said. Shepherds from a near by village neglected the flock while eating breakfast, leaving the sheep to roam free, the daily paper said. The loss to local farmers was estimated at \$65,000.

Can you imagine more than a thousand sheep following one foolish leader, some to their death and others badly wounded? Sheep need a leader, because they will follow the herd. Usually there is a lead sheep in a herd that seems to know the way out to pasture, but if the lead ram is removed the herd will go half way and then stop, unsure which way to go, in this story from Turkey, they were led to their death.

Who would follow individuals, lifestyles or philosophies that end only in personal and eternal destruction? I know a few fellow sheep who fit that description. Do you? Our God demands that we have pure and decent thoughts. Although society condemns excessive viewing of pornography, they will excuse a little bit here and there. Which

herd do you follow? God tells us to stay away from false doctrine, for it spreads like yeast in dough and destroys like gangrene. Yet folks will tell you that watching preachers on television, reading books by heterodox churches, listening to religious music that contains false doctrine can't hurt, because, after all, they believe in God, and that can't be bad for my soul, right? Which herd do you and I follow? God is very clear on his stance regarding sex and marriage. Society is very blatant with teaching tolerance of sexual activity among folks who are not married, and of same sex relationships - after all, they love each other. Which herd do you follow? Children and young adults - God tells you to obey and respect your parents. But I know that there are television shows that you watch, where you see children talking back to their parents and disrespecting other adults. Are you following that herd off the cliff? Society tells you that your money is your money, your possessions are yours, your house is yours, because you earned them and worked hard for them, enjoy them! Yet God says that the earth is his and everything in it, and that he gives you money and possessions to manage faithfully. Which herd do you and I follow?

False doctrine, worldly philosophies, sinful lifestyles - these are the different masks that the wolf wears; the wolf Jesus speaks of in our lesson, who attacks the flock and scatters it. The wolf is that chief enemy of God's people, who works constantly for the destruction of the Church. The wolf loves to prey on helpless, defenseless creatures, God's flock, his believers, and send them to their death. (1Pet 5:8) Since he is headed there too, and misery loves company, Satan loves nothing more than attack Christ's flock using false doctrine, worldly philosophies and sinful lifestyles.

Sheep have many enemies, because they are defenseless creatures. They don't have claws or sharp fangs to fight off wolves or other predators. Try as we may to fight back against the wolf, at times it feels like a struggle we cannot win! Too often the wolf tears us away from the flock and leads us stumbling all the way toward the edge of the cliff of our destruction. Lest any of us thinks that we have never strayed from the flock or fallen prey to Satan's temptations, the prophet Isaiah in 53:6, puts us in our place, "**We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.**" It seems that there is nothing we can do on our own. But our ears perk up when we hear our Good Shepherd call out to us. He goes out and seeks us when we stray. And our ears perk up when we here his voice say, "I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep hear my voice. I lay down my life for the sheep." Beautiful words in our ears! And yet...

What good is it if the shepherd defends the sheep against a wolf attack, and in his struggle dies? Then the wolf is free to attack at will. Not so with Jesus, who freely laid down his life. The Good Shepherd sacrificed himself to keep his sheep safe with him.

December 4, 2006: manning a .50-caliber machine gun in the turret of a Humvee, Pfc. Ross McGinnis could see the insurgent on a rooftop fling a hand grenade at his vehicle. He shouted and tried to deflect it, but it fell inside. Four of his buddies were down there. What followed was a stunning act of self-sacrifice. McGinnis, a 19-year-old from rural Pennsylvania and the youngest soldier in his unit, threw himself backward onto the grenade, pinning the grenade between his body and the radio unit. He absorbed the blast

with his body. He was killed instantly. The others escaped serious injury. Sgt. 1st Class Cedric Thomas, the platoon sergeant, said, "He had time to jump out of the truck. He chose not to." Thomas and three other soldiers were saved from certain serious injury or death.

We hear this story and a tear comes to our eye. Our hearts throb with American pride. This man was so young, had so much potential, a full life ahead of him. Yet he chose to die for his brothers and his country. How many more tears are shed, how much more do our hearts throb with joy, when we hear the words of our Good Shepherd, when we contemplate the tremendous price he paid to make us his sheep (vs15-17)! The shepherd gives his life for... not just you and me, but for a world full of sheep who love to wander. This is such a foreign concept in America, where everything is for me, and ought to be centered around me. Me do something for you? No, you do it for me! Yet the Son of God, the King of kings, comes to earth from his throne in heaven, not to be served, but to serve all humankind, and lay down his life on behalf of all sheep.

You have no doubt heard that Egyptian leaders ordered the slaughter of more than 400,000 pigs in their country to help protect against the swine flu. Although the World Health Organization has repeatedly stated that swine flu is not found in pigs and that pork products are safe to eat. Because of our sins of straying from the herd we ought to be exterminated, like these pigs. Instead, the Good Shepherd steps in dies in our place, as our substitute; he was not a sheep that wandered, but a Shepherd that walked blamelessly. He is the single innocent one for all guilty sinners. By his sacrifice, our Good Shepherd rescued you from the jaws of death. The Good Shepherd fell on the grenade of your sins, which would have blasted you to an eternity of suffering, your sins which have earned you death. He takes the blast. He dies for you.

Pfc. McGinnis's father, reflecting on his family's loss, wrote that his son went to war not to die but "to fight and win and come home to us." Jesus went to war to die. Luke tells us that before he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus "resolutely set out for Jerusalem," literally, he set his face like flint. With determination Jesus went to Golgotha to die. With resolve, Jesus went to die, so that he might then physically rise again, and 40 days later to ascend into heaven, and make himself invisible again so that he can be with us always.

For the Good Shepherd does not abandon the flock. He does not leave us alone with the wolf. He exercises constant, loving care through his Word and Sacraments so that we might remain his blessed sheep in this life and the life to come. **"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."** (vs 27,28)

Because our Good Shepherd knows we are sheep and love to follow our own way or the way of this world, because he knows that we are harassed by Satan everyday of our lives, the Good Shepherd knows that we, just like sheep, need a leader to show us the way. In previous sermons or articles you may have heard that sheep are stupid. That's a little strong. While it's true that in a storm sheep have been known to pile on top of each other in the corner of the pasture smothering the ones at the bottom, sheep do just fine if they have a leader. The Good Shepherd tells us how to live as sheep. In his Word, he shows

us the way. We follow his Word because his Word is the green pastures and the quiet waters that strengthen and nourish our spiritual bodies. In his Word he tells us what is best for us, and he knows what is best for us.

One shepherd commented that sheep thrive on patterns and habits. Sheep love to eat at regular intervals. So do we. Feed yourself and your family regularly. The godly habit of a parent bringing his child to church every Sunday is extremely powerful. The Good Shepherd provides all the spiritual feed you could ever want in the word preached, shared, read, even physically consumed at the Lord's Supper.

Maybe it's obvious but part of making good habits is stopping the bad ones. Did you know that a young lamb will close its eyes lower its head and repeatedly try to go through a six inch hole in a closed gate to get a mouthful of grass? When sheep get a little older, they don't do this anymore. Part of growing as a Christian is stopping the destructive habits that you used to do. That's not to say that you will be immune from sin, but that it doesn't rule you. Follow your Good Shepherd out of situations, temptations where you know you will fail. If you have been mastered by something, led away by the philosophies, the sinful lifestyles, enticed by the false doctrines of the world, if you've caught yourself walking toward the edge of the cliff, follow the Good Shepherd away from those sins. Pray to him and ask for help. Seek his guidance through his Word. Receive strength to do it through his Sacraments. Look to the one who laid down his life for yours and live as his sheep.

There will be more talk about pigs and swine in the next few weeks. So when you hear about pigs, redirect your thoughts toward sheep, and how you are part of Jesus' sheep pen, and how your Good Shepherd laid down his life for yours. Amen.