

# Shepherd of the Lost

Easter 4 b - Good Shepherd Sunday  
Ps.23 Jn.10.11-18

The Rev. Thomas L. Weitzel  
Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Spring Hill, FL  
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There is no doubt that the image of the Good Shepherd is the most popular of the images of Christ, and has been so since the earliest of centuries of believers. Although early Christians initially followed the old Jewish law that forbid the portrayal of the object of faith in images, it wasn't very long before Christians fully embraced their freedom from certain aspects of the law and began portraying Jesus on the walls of their homes and their places of worship. And one of the oldest known drawings of Jesus portrays him as the Good Shepherd

The detail there shows Jesus in ways that are as familiar to any of us who have seen images of the Good Shepherd: A Shepherd caring for a lamb in his obvious love for it. A Shepherd who loves all his sheep and knows them intimately. A Shepherd who will even leave the flock in order to seek out and save that one lost sheep and return it to the fold.

And exactly who is that when we are talking about lost sheep? You and me when we get off the path. You and me when we sin. You and me and those we know and just as many we don't know who can get so caught up in things that aren't so good for us.

The nightly news features the lost of all walks and stations in life on almost a daily basis. Some of the stories are enough to tear your heart out. Whether it's people in our own community, or from somewhere else in the world, or maybe even in our own families, the tragic details of some people's stories make us wonder just how much more lost a person can be.

I remember having to preach at the funeral of a middle-aged man who had taken his own life, leaving behind a wife and two small children. As it turned out, the service was held the day before this one, Good Shepherd Sunday. I couldn't help but reference the Good Shepherd image in what I said on that occasion. I can think of no example of a lost sheep that is more clear to me than such a person as this. A tragic choice like that comes in the context of overwhelming burdens and problems that have brought a person to a point where rationality has been suspended and hope seems nonexistent. How much more lost can a person be?

It's for such as these that the Good Shepherd laid down his life in the first place. For the really badly lost and the not-so-badly lost, but lost none the less. It's for ALL the lost that the Good Shepherd goes looking in order to return it to the fold, calm its fears with his loving, and bring it peace.

At that point, as a Lutheran, I lean heavily upon grace -- especially as it connects to Baptism. Because Baptism is not something that you and I do as much as it is something that God does. It's not how much I believe or whether I believe enough or whether I have memorized my Bible passages and catechism correctly or whether I can recite the creeds and the Lord's Prayer by heart. It's not what I do at all.

It's what GOD does in Baptism that counts. At Baptism, God makes me his own child. I am joined to him through Christ. I am washed clean through and through, and I am joined to the Good Shepherd and become a part of his flock. I become a child of God, and no one can ever take that away from me.

That is grace, my friends. Because it is entirely God's doing. And the fact that we baptize mere babes in arms underscores that fact. A baby brings nothing to the font. A baby offers nothing -- can say nothing, can believe nothing, can memorize nothing, can do nothing, but simply receive the grace of God as pure gift. And the gift is true. And the gift is God's. No one can ever take that gift away from that child.

From that point on, that child is a child of God. That child will walk with God. That child will be guided by the Good Shepherd -- through parents and Sunday School teachers, through Christians teaching by faith and example, through Bible study and worship, through Confirmation when that child has grown enough to speak and own the words of faith, and on through life. That Good Shepherd will always be with that child of God.

And when that child becomes lost, when that child sins and sins again, the Good Shepherd will leave the flock to go searching and calling for that lost child like a lost sheep, until that sheep is found.

Will that be the only time that the Good Shepherd has to leave the flock to find that lost child? No. Because at some point, we as Christians are just like sheep. And, you know, sheep are really pretty dumb. They can't seem to do much of anything right without the constant guiding and prodding of the Shepherd.

So the analogy of scripture and the Church here is pretty accurate. And that means that the Good Shepherd is likely to have to go looking for that lost sheep again and again and again.

But what is so important here is to understand that the Shepherd does it. The Good Shepherd goes looking for the lost sheep, no matter how many times that sheep gets lost.

Why? Because being lost does not mean that we cease to be a part of the flock. Being lost does not mean that we cease to be a child of God. Being lost does not mean that the Shepherd no longer loves us.

All of scripture affirms that God loved us before we ever loved him. God loved us even when we were unlovable. The Good Shepherd loved us so much as to even lay down his life for the sheep that he loved. And that was not because we deserved it or earned it or believed it rightly. That Shepherd laid down his life of his own free will, out of love for us -- PRECISELY in order to save the lost among us and to keep them in the fold.

Never again can my stupidity as a dumb sheep, who is prone to being lost in sin, keep the Shepherd from seeking me out and returning me to the fold. That is

grace, free and undeserved. And I believe it with all my heart. And I am constantly moved to thankfulness for it.

That is the message of Good Shepherd Sunday. The Shepherd loves the sheep with an unceasing love. The Shepherd seeks out the lost with an unceasing love. The Shepherd even lays down his life for the sheep with an unceasing love. And you, children of God, are all a part of his flock, by his grace, and the object of that love.