

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen

As I've already introduced to you, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter is always designated Good Shepherd Sunday.

- It is good and proper that we do this.
- We still have fresh in our minds Easter, and in fact, in our opening hymn for today sang that we live in this joyful Eastertide.

We saw that Jesus laid down His life for us.

- But then saw that the tomb was empty.
- HE IS RISEN. HE IS VICTORIOUS.
- Jesus as risen from the dead to shepherd us, His people.

Our Scripture readings for today invite us to reflect on all this.....

- That we have a Good Shepherd in Jesus.....and what that means to us. More directly, what that means to you.
- Holy Spirit, give to me the words that I would bring forth this truth today.

The metaphor that Scripture uses often of Jesus as the Shepherd and we as the sheep fits us well.

- We have many of the same characteristics of sheep.

Sheep are vulnerable.

- They cannot defend themselves. We cannot defend ourselves.
- Sheep are vulnerable to attack. We are vulnerable to attack.
- On our own we are powerless, especially against the devil.

Sheep will follow the crowd.

- One sheep goes over the cliff. It is not a stretch to see the rest of the flock go over the cliff.
- We tend to go with the crowd. Public opinions and pressures can sway us.

Sheep need a source of water and food provided to them.

- We need a source of water and food.
- Not just physical water and food; but especially also spiritual water and food.

Without fresh water, sheep will otherwise drink contaminated water and eat a pasture until it is completely barren....along with the poisonous weeds that were there.

- We easily can drink from polluted waters. We easily can eat poisonous weeds.
- We need the life giving pure water that the Holy Spirit gives us.
- We need to be fed continually by God's Word.

Sheep will not lie down unless they are free from fear and tension and aggravation and hunger.

- We will not find peace and rest unless we are free from fear and tension and aggravation and hunger.

Sheep need direction otherwise they will wander aimlessly.

- We need direction otherwise we will wander aimlessly.

Sheep can have rivalries and infighting.

- We can have rivals and infighting.

Sheep can be easily aggravated by pests.....insects, head flies, and the like.

- A sheep can literally be so aggravated by pests that they beat their heads against trees, rocks, posts, or brush.
- Advanced stages of this can lead to blindness.
- An infested sheep may even kill itself in a frenzied endeavor to gain respite from the aggravation.
- We can become easily aggravated and bothered by others. Even lose our sense of control and patience.

Individual sheep can wander off from the flock and be lost.

- Who of us has not seen or had experience with that in the church?
- In our prayers on Sunday morning we often pray for those who have wandered from the flock.

Sheep need a shepherd.

- Not just any shepherd but a good shepherd.
- We also need a Good Shepherd.

I invite you to go with me this morning on a brief ride in the hill country of Israel and I will illustrate for you what I am talking about.

- We will contrast the pastures and sheep of the good shepherd versus what we see for the negligent, neglecting, no time, no care for their sheep, shepherds.
- We will first start with the noncaring, callous, and indifferent shepherd.

Do you see the conditions their sheep are under?

- Do you see that bare barren field? The impoverished pasture?
- The sheep have gnawed away at the vegetation as best they can.
- They have had to forage for themselves.

Did you also notice?

- The sheep have no shelter to safeguard and protect them from storms and blizzards.
- They fall prey to dogs, cougars, and rustlers.
- Their shepherd is not around to protect them.....and even if he was.....he would not help them, let alone give his life for them.

They have muddy polluted water to drink.

- They have no relief from their wounds, bruises, diseases, and pests.
- The flock seems to be missing some sheep. It is obvious some have wandered off on their own with no love or care to bring them back.
- The poor sheep. It is quite a pathetic sight.

Now contrast this with what we see as we now come to the flock and pastures of the Good Shepherd.

- And as we do this, please picture ourselves.
- We have a Good Shepherd that cares for us, provides for us, and is with us always and has literally laid down His life for us and taken it up again.

The best way for me to describe what we are now seeing is to use verses from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

- That beautiful psalm that we chanted just a few minutes ago.
- For familiarities' sake, I will use the words from the King James Version of this.

We start with verse 2.

- “He maketh me to LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES. HE LEADETH ME BESIDE STILL WATERS.

Green pastures. Still waters.

- Well cared for. Well planned out.
- Remember, sheep will not lie down if they have fear, tension, aggravation, or hunger.
- Remember also, sheep are easily panicked. Nothing calms the sheep like seeing their shepherd.

We live in an uncertain world.

- We live in the midst of misfortune.
- But we always have the awareness that our Good Shepherd is there.
- Protecting and providing for us. All that we need.

The Psalm continues, “He restoreth my soul.”

- You may have heard me tell you this before; but a sheep on its back can not get up.
- It is a rather pathetic sight.
- They lay on their back flailing about and helpless.

Sometimes it will bleat a little for help.....but that is all they can do.

- Left like that, eventually they will die.
- Also, in that posture they are even more vulnerable to predators.

Think about your life.

- Have you ever been in the equivalent of a sheep on its back?
- Maybe you are right now.

Our Good Shepherd is always there. “He restoreth my soul.”

- Our Good Shepherd is always alert to our problems.
- He understands and knows your needs.
- He tenderly rolls us over and lifts us and helps us to get on our feet
- He talks to us gently and brings circulation back to us.
- The Good Shepherd literally saves our lives and gives us longer to live on this earth.

Verse 3 ends, “He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His names sake.”

- I already mentioned that sheep will gnaw at a pasture until it is barren and bare.

The Good Shepherd will keep His sheep on the move. He knows His pastures and He has a predetermined plan of action.

- And He leads the way. He goes first.
- Getting rid of the poisonous weeds. Surveying, protecting from predators.

Our Good Shepherd has a plan for your life.

- And He is leading you.
- We only need to follow Him.
- I am reminded here of Proverbs chapter 16, verse 25.....
- “There is a way that appears right to man, but in the end it leads to death.”

Psalm 23 verse 4 begins, “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me.”

- As spring begins, sheep pasture in the low valleys. As the season continues on, they need to keep moving towards higher and higher ground.
- And then as the fall and winter months come on, they have to reverse the process and descend back from the high ground to their home.

This can be treacherous and dangerous. Predators, and challenges at every turn.

- During this time the flock is entirely alone with the shepherd.
- And the shepherd takes the flock only where he has gone before.

Through the peaks and valleys of the experiences of this life we go with our Good Shepherd.

- And as we step back from this on a bigger scale, at the end of this life, we go to higher ground, to even more intimate place with our Good Shepherd.

Our Good Shepherd spares no pains or troubles or time, to watch out for us.

- It is most reassuring and reinforcing to know that even in the dark valleys of our lives we have a source of strength and courage and presence found in our Good Shepherd.

Psalm 23 verse 4 ends, “Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.”

- The shepherd’s staff. All by itself a symbol of love and caring.

It is used to draw the sheep together.

- It is used for the Good Shepherd to draw the sheep to Himself.
- It is used to bring the new born lamb to the mother. That is, bring family together.
- And it is used to guide the sheep.

I trust it is easy to see the analogy here of all this to ourselves and to the church with our Good Shepherd.

- We draw together and walk together with Christ.

Psalm 23, verse 5, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

- We have already made reference that the Good Shepherd goes ahead of us.
- He provides. He protects.
- And for us here this morning we again will see this first hand as we approach the Altar of our Lord and partake of His very body and blood.

Verse 5 of Psalm 23 ends, “Thou anointeth my head with oil, my cup runneth over.”

- To care and provide for the irritations and pests sheep face, their heads are anointed with oil.
- And when this happens there is an immediate change in behavior.

Sometimes the rams, especially during rutting season, will be in conflict with one another and butt heads.

- This butting, ramming of heads can be heard miles away, at any hour of the day or night.

Thou annointeth my head.

- A grease is applied to the heads of the rams.
- It softens the direct hits as they slide off.
- And sometimes they stand there feeling stupid and frustrated.
- And their heat and tension dissipate.

And for us humans, we talk of being anointed by the Holy Spirit.

- The irritations, the tensions lesson.
- We look to live with one another together in the arms and care of our Good Shepherd.

All of this that we have seen with the Good Shepherd can be summarized this morning for us in 2 ways.

- First, the beginning and end of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.
- The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want. And surely, goodness, and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Dear Christian friends.....

- You have a Good Shepherd.
- He has given His life for you and has taken it up again.
- No trouble is too great for Him.
- He loves you. He takes personal pleasure in you.

And He does this today and He will do it for all eternity.

- And no matter what you face, you can be completely satisfied with His management of your life.
- You can declare with King David, “The Lord is my Shepherd.”

I mentioned this all can be summarized in 2 ways.

- As I bring this to a close, I want to briefly mention the second way, our new mission statement.
- It does a very good job of expressing all that we have talked about here this morning.

“Sharing hope in the joy of Christ.”

- Think of this statement for just a moment in the context of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.
- Sharing hope.
- Hope in the Bible, hope for us, is not like “I hope it doesn’t rain today.”
- It is the certainty we have in our Lord.
- That He is present and that He will care and provide.
- And, of course, our church name is Hope.

And we have this hope in the joy of Christ.

- We have joy in the care and providing and hope of our Good Shepherd.

And we share that hope in the joy of Christ.....

- We share this hope as the flock of believers here at Hope.
- And we share this hope in the joy of Christ as we go out into the world and invite other sheep to join us.

Dear fellow sheep.....

- The shepherd we follow makes all the difference in the world.

We have the Good Shepherd.

- Share that hope in the joy of Christ. Amen.

(Please stand) And now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Having heard the Word of God we now prepare our hearts and minds to confess the words of the Nicene Creed as found on page 158 in your hymnal.