

## Follow the Good Shepherd

Fellow members of God's flock,

It is Good Shepherd Sunday. We love to hear about the Lord as our gentle, caring shepherd. But if he's my Shepherd, then I must be a sheep.

Have you ever thought of what we are calling ourselves today? Think of the qualities of different animals. You can probably finish the phrases: "Strong as an... ox." "Graceful as a... swan." "Ferocious as a... lion." But how would you fill in this one: "(Blank) as a sheep"? Helpless? Weak? Dumb? Probably not a compliment word.

And when we think of wandering sheep, we know that they can get not only lost, if they wander off they can get killed!

No wonder that the picture of Jesus as our Shepherd is so striking. Today his words encourage us, Follow the Good Shepherd!

Sheep can be helpless. They need someone to watch over them. Jesus pictures his work for us. **"The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep."** Several times in the Old Testament, God promised to send a true shepherd for his people, a descendant of David, who had been a shepherd before being king. The promised shepherd would save his people from the dangers on earth.

We can be so helpless—this pandemic made that clear to a world that thought it was conquering all diseases. But even more than physical helplessness, we are spiritually helpless. We continue to do selfish things, and we can't just stop them. In fact, as we summarize the Bible's teaching in the Small Catechism, "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him."

Sheep are vulnerable not only to wandering off on their own. Jesus warned about those who might lead us astray. **"Any man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber."** There are people trying to lead us away from our Savior.

How are we protected? By hearing the voice of our true shepherd. **"The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize his voice."** We understand the picture—sort of like an upset baby that calms down as soon as she hears her mother's voice.

To most of us, sheep all look the same. As I talk about sheep, you are probably thinking of a white, fuzzy, cute thing that goes "baaah." But to the Good Shepherd, each of his sheep is unique; and he calls each one individually.

Middle Eastern shepherds often have a distinct call for each of their sheep. Henry Morton reported on a trip he took near Bethlehem. Two flocks, of different shepherds, had roamed together and gotten mixed together. One shepherd stood a little ways from the group and began

to call. First one, then another, then four or five animals ran toward him, until he had counted his flock. Shepherds can even lead their flocks into a city like Jerusalem, with cars whizzing by, and keep them safe by their calls to the sheep.

Our Shepherd calls us. In Holy Baptism your sins were washed away personally. And our Shepherd continues to call you through his Word. “I believe that I cannot by my own thinking...believe in Jesus Christ... or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel.”

Jesus uses his Word, like a Shepherd, calling each one of his sheep. Like a rod and staff, Jesus uses his Law to point out your sins and protect you from the consequences of your sinful nature. And Jesus uses the Gospel, the Good News of what he did for you, to call you back to himself. Day after day, Jesus is guiding you, feeding you with his Word, protecting you in the darkest valleys. Even when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you can be confident, for your Shepherd is with you. He went through death and rose to life so you are certain of his love forever.

In Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, one room near the entrance is called “the Church.” A couple hundred years ago a preacher would lead his people there for services. Today a tour guide will take you there, climb the large stone called “the Pulpit,” and say he’s going to preach a very short sermon: he says, “Listen to your guide and stay close to him.” Good advice, as you don’t want to wander off the path in the cave.

That is what Jesus says to us spiritual sheep. Listen to your shepherd, and stay close to him.

But John reports that those listening to Jesus on this day **“did not understand what he was telling them.”** So Jesus drew another picture for them. He said, **“I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep.”** Jesus, you see, is the only way into God’s flock.

This is how we tell a thief and robber—anyone who tries to lead you through some other way than Jesus is not a true shepherd.

Our lesson today is from John chapter 10. Right before this we have the story of Jesus healing a man born blind. You would think that all the Jewish people, including the leaders, would rejoice at the loving thing Jesus had done. Instead, they attacked him, because he had healed the man on a Sabbath; and when the man refused to go along with their attacks, they threw him out of the synagogue—in essence, saying he was not a part of God’s flock.

Some of those same Pharisees were in the crowd that Jesus was speaking to in chapter 10. And Jesus wanted to make it clear to everyone that those false teachers were among the thieves who were threatening God’s sheep.

What would a spiritual thief say today? Anything that would deny that Jesus is the gate, the only gate into God’s kingdom.

Will good people be saved? What if they aren’t Christians, but are still good? Most Christians would say, “Yes.” You may have wondered about it yourself. Someone who gives a lot to charity or spends a lot of time helping the poor, or risks their life for others—certainly they would get into heaven, right?

The problem is that all of us, even the best people, are sinful. We are selfish; we are proud; we do bad things. The only way to be saved is by trusting in Jesus, trusting his

righteousness instead of our own. We can't be good enough to earn our way into heaven. We need to believe in Jesus.

Now, a spiritual thief may be trickier than to deny that. He might say, Yes, Jesus is the Gate; he cleared the way for you to enter heaven. But now it's up to you to choose to be his follower, or to show in your life that you really are a Christian. Again, this might sound good; until we see where the focus is—on me. My salvation would depend on whether I lead a good life, whether I choose Jesus. But we are sinners, and we can't choose the right path. That kind of preaching will lead us away from God's flock.

**“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;”** Jesus said; **“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”** Jesus does not take, Jesus gives; he gives us life beyond our dreams.

How? Later in this chapter Jesus explained: he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. That really is a strange picture. Would a human shepherd risk his life just to save a sheep? Would he sacrifice himself for a sheep?

Jesus did. In our earlier lesson, Peter talked about how Jesus “bore our sins...on the cross...by his wounds you have been healed.” You, a sheep that was going astray, have been saved from judgment, you've been given a home in heaven, you've been given a new life even on this earth.

Don't listen to other voices that tell you that you can make things right with God by doing or saying or feeling the right things. Don't listen to those who say there is any other way into the sheep pen than Jesus.

Jesus is your Good Shepherd. You are his own sheep. He goes ahead of you, protecting and guiding you. Follow him, for you know his loving voice. Amen.