

Sheep, Shepherds, and Wolves

In the name of him who gives us eternal life, dear friends in Christ: Jesus the Good Shepherd – it's surely one of the most vivid and endearing images that our Lord gives us to understand his relationship with us. It casts him as our perfect leader, caretaker, protector, and defender – the guy who understands what's going on, where we're going and why, and who's going to make sure that along the way we get fed in green pastures and find our rest beside the still waters. He's got his trusty staff to beat down our enemies, and too, to apply some discipline to us if we stray out of line. But Jesus is the *Good* Shepherd in that he takes it a step far beyond what's expected of a shepherd: he lays down his life for the sheep. That's unheard of. Imagine a father sending his son or daughter out to tend the sheep. The youth returns saying "We were attacked by a lion! He took one of the sheep and ran off with it." And the father replies, "What? And you didn't die trying to defend it or get it back?" No one would do that. We all understand that a human – the life of your child – is worth infinitely more than *any* number of sheep. And yet, such is the Father's love for us that he gives his only begotten Son to be our Good Shepherd who willingly lays down his life so that we might live.

The problem (if you can call it that) with the Good Shepherd image is that it casts us in the unflattering role of being sheep – creatures which on the relative scale of animal intelligence rate only slightly higher than chickens (if that). They have to be guided to food and water because they can't find it on their own. They have no natural ability to fight or to defend themselves from predators, nor can they run fast enough to escape them. Given a chance they will wander off and get lost. So, no, that Jesus describes us as sheep is anything but complimentary; but then, Jesus is not one to avoid the truth no matter how painful or unpleasant it might be. Helpless, pathetic, stupid, wandering sheep turns out to be a very good description of us humans in our fallen condition.

That being the case, what's truly remarkable is that the Lord selects some of his sheep and appoints them to be shepherds for others. That's what the word "pastor" means: shepherd. And shepherding the Lord's flock is the subject of today's first reading from the book of Acts.

Let's get some context: Paul is in the process of wrapping up his third mission journey. He has spent the better part of three years in the city of Ephesus on the southwest coast of what is Turkey today. From his headquarters there he has planted Christian congregations in many of the surrounding towns and villages. Before heading back to Jerusalem, he has taken a quick trip overland around the edges of the Aegean Sea to revisit churches that he got started earlier on his second mission journey: places like Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth. Now, heading back east to complete his journey, he stops at Miletus which is not far from Ephesus. From there he sends for the pastors of the churches with whom he has been working for the last three years in order to give them some final instructions before he leaves them for good. It is, to the best of my knowledge, the world's first pastors' conference – which, I am certain, was more interesting and edifying than the one I had to attend early last week.

Paul wants these men to be good shepherds for *the* Good Shepherd and for the people he has entrusted to their care. And with no false humility, he holds up himself as the example they are to follow. You know how I lived among you, he tells them, you've seen me in action. Despite hardships and dangers from our enemies, I did not shrink back from declaring anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying to Jew and Gentile alike of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. In Lutheran terms,

Law and Gospel – that’s always the heart of every message a pastor is to proclaim: the Law that convicts us of our sins and causes us to fear the righteous wrath of God, and the Gospel of his grace in sending his Son to suffer and die in our place so that by faith in him we might be counted righteous in his sight.

But while Law and Gospel are central to what a pastor is to teach and proclaim, there’s more. Paul says that he is innocent of their blood because he taught them the whole counsel of God – implying that if he had neglected to teach all of God’s Word, he would be guilty – and so will they if they fail to teach all of God’s Word. A pastor is not free to pick and choose the parts of God’s Word he likes, or to avoid uncomfortable, sensitive, or hotly controversial topics. And yes, doing so will at times make his hearers upset and angry. Paul knew all about that. And he suffered because of it. But he knew that it was better to suffer at the hands of men for doing his job than to suffer in the hands of God for not doing it.

Then Paul admonishes them to watch themselves as well as the flock the Holy Spirit has entrusted to their care. So doing he reminds them that they are really nothing more than sheep in shepherd’s clothing. The Law and Gospel and the counsel of God that they teach and apply to others must always first be applied to themselves. They must remain lifelong students of the Word allowing the Good Shepherd to shepherd them, and seeing that he continuously washes them in his blood.

If not they will become something else: fierce wolves that do not spare the flock. Jesus described false prophets that way, calling them wolves in sheep’s clothing. Even more destructive is a wolf in shepherd’s clothing. And this is the frightening thing: Paul says that he knows that even among the men he is speaking to, men he personally taught and ordained as pastors in the church, from among them such wolves would come. Now, it shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus chose twelve men, and one of them turned out rotten. The difference is that he knew who it was going to be. Paul doesn’t. But he knows what they’ll do, namely “speak twisted things to draw away disciples after them.” They speak their own words, not God’s; or they spin what God has said off into directions it was never meant to go. They do it to serve themselves, not the Good Shepherd they supposedly work for.

Never is this more evident than today. A Christian podcast I sometimes listen to has for the last ten years held a contest for the worst sermon preached on Easter Sunday. Submissions come in from all over the country, generally from these big mega-churches that are located in the suburbs of major cities and where, sadly, the congregations are often little more than the pastor’s own personality cult. In message after message, it’s astonishing how little is said about Jesus dying for our sin and being raised for our justification, and how much is said about how Jesus overcame death so that you too can overcome your obstacles and reach your goals of health, wealth, fame, and happiness. Oh, and on your way out don’t forget to stop by the bookstore in the lobby to buy the pastor’s latest volume – you won’t be able to reach your goals without that. It really is that bad. Worse, people who are sitting there thinking they’re getting bonus points with God for showing up on Easter (the one day of the year they attend) come and go without actually repenting of their sins or hearing the Gospel.

All of which speaks of an obligation the sheep have to their shepherd, and that is the expectation of hearing through them the voice of the Good Shepherd. “My sheep hear my voice”, Jesus says. They recognize it when they hear it. How? By familiarity, by exercising spiritual discernment, by verifying that what is being taught by the pastor aligns with Word of God and the confessions of true Christian faith that have been derived from it. Just as your

pastor is under the obligation to teach the whole counsel of God you are obliged to ensure that he does and to correct him if he doesn't.

Returning to the text, Paul finally gets to the hardest part of his message, and that's the letting go. There is a tendency for those who have been in charge of something for some time to want to try to continue to exercise their influence after they are gone. It stems from the feeling that without me here to run everything, it just won't go right. Paul would not be human if looking at the faces of these men whom he trained, appointed, and worked with side by side for three years he didn't feel it. But Paul also knows that no one is indispensable, and that the churches he started in Ephesus and its surrounding communities were never his. They belong to the Lord. And so it is to the Lord and to the word of his grace that Paul commends them, trusting that the Good Shepherd's work would indeed continue here, and that it would be brought to completion on the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ. The same is true in all the churches that are in Christ Jesus. Shepherds come and go, but the voice of the Good Shepherd endures forever. It's to him that we commend ourselves now and always, trusting that by his Word he will build us up and give us a glorious inheritance with the saints. God grant it to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!