

+ The 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost + October 1, 2020  
St. Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin. Pastor Curt S. Backhaus

*Isaiah 53:6-7 | EHV*

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.  
He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.*

### ***A shepherd, a priest and the Lamb***

Isaiah invites us to look at three of the many hills in and around Jerusalem. On the first hill stands a shepherd; on the second, a priest; on the third, a Lamb. It's Friday, the day before the Passover Celebration.

A shepherd stands on a nameless hill south of Jerusalem and glances over his flock. They're simple, docile, dumb little animals. But he loves them. He has led them all over these hills, looking for whatever vegetation and water they could find. He knows all of them by name. He knows their habits, too. He knows they are prone to wander. He also knows that if he doesn't watch them closely, they'll wander off and get separated, or lost, or even killed...

He looks down at the valley below and sees a river of pilgrims heading to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Many of them are going to the Temple. He looks back at his sheep and mutters under his breath, "It's all worthless." He'd take care of his sheep, but they'd never learn to take care of themselves. He'd lead them to be sheared, and they'd never complain. He'd lead them to the slaughterhouse, and they'd die silently. Or, he'd sell them at the Temple, and they never let on that they'd soon be sacrificed. "It's all worthless," he sighs.

A priest stands on the second hill, the most prominent and important hill in Jerusalem. This was, Mt. Moriah, where Abraham offered up his son, Isaac. Here David bought the threshing floor where his son, Solomon, built a house for God. The priest is looking over his flock, his congregation. The priest doesn't know all of them by name. He can't even understand some of their languages. But he does know their habits. He knows that sinners are just like sheep. He knows that they've wandered away from God and his will and his ways.

He watches a group of people gather near the bronze altar in the courtyard. Each person in line is clutching a lamb. The lamb is going to be their substitute. The priest looks over each lamb, one at a time. He checks the first one for spot or blemish, for broken bone or disease. The lamb has to be perfect, because the worshipper isn't. The priest lays his hands on the lamb's head. He lays the guilt of the sinner on the substitute. Then, he lays the lamb on the altar and kills it. The sacrifice is complete; the sinner, forgiven, can turn and go home a new man.

He finishes the first sacrifice, looks at the huge crowd of worshippers and then, he turns to view the temple where God dwells. He stares at the dark curtain that blocks the Holy of Holies from his view. He mutters under his breath. It isn't the slaughter of animals that disturbs him. It's the endlessness of it all. How many years has he seen the people come and go? How many sins has he heard confessed? How many sacrifices has he made? How many bloody carcasses? "It's so endless!" he sighs.

After every sacrifice that curtain is still there. He knows that the blood of animals won't appease God. Simple ceremony won't tear down the veil of sin that divides the wicked from their God. The people will

return to offer sacrifice again, but God will still seem so far away. The priest stares at the curtain and wonders, "Will the blood of yet another lamb really matter?"

A Lamb stands on a third, little hill outside of Jerusalem. The hill's only significance is that criminals are executed here. It's called Golgotha, "the place of the skull."

The Lamb isn't the lamb of a shepherd or a worshipper or a priest. He's Mary's little Lamb. The Lamb of God. He's a long way from home. He never wandered off; he's been led to this hill to be slaughtered. Roman soldiers lay him on the altar, a cross. They nail his hands and his feet. He prays for them. Others mock and ridicule him. He stays silent.

God lays the guilt of the world on him. He's oppressed and afflicted with your hell and mine, and He doesn't complain. You see, He's sacrificing Himself. That Lamb on that hill far, far away is your Substitute. Your Savior. Your Salvation.

And then, the greatest thing in history takes place. God looks at His Sacrifice and then turns and looks one last time at the curtain in the temple and says, "No more!" And it was torn...from top to bottom. Ripped in two.

"No more! No more lambs!"

"No more curtain! No more sacrifices!"

"No more sin! No more guilt! No more separation!"

And, in His dying breath, the Lamb shouts, "IT IS FINISHED!"