

Good Shepherd Sunday + The 4th Sunday of Easter + April 19 and 22, 2018
St. Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin. Pastor Curt S. Backhaus

Psalm 23 | NKJV

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
he leads me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Ever wonder why the psalmist uses the metaphor of a shepherd and his sheep? David's first job was tending sheep, so he could well understand what God asked him to record for us here. But for the most part we're small town-types –city folk. And if we have any farm experience, it's with crops and cows and even chickens, but sheep?

Couldn't David have used a different illustration? He wasn't just a shepherder after all. He was also a daring warrior who outgunned Goliath and a skilled survivalist who outfoxed Saul and his armies. He was a court singer. A conqueror. And, a king! Why not draw on those experiences? "The Lord is my commander-in-chief and I'm his warrior," perhaps. Or "the Lord is my inspiration and I'm his poet." Or "the Lord is my King and I'm his ambassador..."

But call the Lord your Shepherd and that makes you nothing but a sheep. A warrior at least gets a uniform, a weapon, a dangerous mission --maybe even a medal. The singer has his adoring fans, limousines and platinum records. And the ambassador represents all the authority and wisdom of the throne. But sheep? What's so great about being a sheep?

Sheep, to put it bluntly, are dumb and defenseless. They have no fangs or claws. They can't bite you or outrun you. And no one ever picks them for the team mascot. We've got Tigers, Seahawks, Bulls, Bears, Eagles, Rams –all kinds of animals you'd never mess with... But if you played for the Tomah Lambs or the Sparta Sheep, how worried would your opponent be?

And sheep are dirty. A cat can keep itself clean. A bird can take a bath. But sheep get dirty and stay that way. Sheep are simple, silly and so incapable of taking care of themselves. And besides being totally helpless, they stink and they're stubborn.

We don't really care about sheep. But a warrior? We'll throw a parade and dedicate

monuments for him! We'll pack concert halls and stadiums for modern-day minstrels. The media will write down and record and we will read and listen to everything an important official says. But sheep? They don't sing or speak or act. They don't roll over or beg or fetch. They really don't do much of anything. So no one notices and no one cares.

Unless of course, you're the shepherd. The shepherd is the one person who watches over his sheep. Cares for them. Protects them. Feeds them. Guides them. Leads them. Even sleeps with them. And that's the point. Jesus is the Good Shepherd we sheep need.

And if life hasn't taught you what you really need, then maybe you need to understand a little better how much like sheep we really are.

I think it all comes down to reliance. If you tend to rely on yourself for everything, if you consider yourself rather reliable, then you might have trouble thinking of yourself as a sheep.

So let me ask, how successful have you been relying on yourself? Take a little quiz, would you?

See if any of this describes you: You can control your moods. You're never grumpy or sullen. You're always upbeat and upright. Does that describe you? No?

Well, try this: You are at peace with everyone. Every relationship as sweet as fudge. Everyone who has ever met you always speaks so highly of you. You love all and are loved by all. Is that you?

If not, how about this: You have no fears. You're as tough as Teflon. Wall Street plummets-no problem. The doctor diagnoses cancer? Yawn. World War III starts? What's for dinner? Is that you?

You need no forgiveness. Never made a mistake. Never cheated. Never lied. Never lied about cheating. Is that you? No?

Me neither. "We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way," Isaiah writes and he's right. We're sheep who could use a shepherd.

Your Good Shepherd is Jesus.

He laid down his life for you only to take it up again. He died on the cross to pay for every last one of your sins and then rose from the grave on the third day to prove that you're forgiven and that he has given you complete victory over death and the devil.

In baptism, Jesus claimed you as his own precious, little lamb. He speaks to you in his Holy Word, where you hear his voice. He prepares a table right here and a special meal that nourishes and keeps your faith strong.

He guides you. Provides for you. Defends you. Delivers you. He gives you eternal life. And, no one will ever pluck you out of his hand.

Because Jesus is your Good Shepherd, you don't need anything else. As you follow him, goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life, and you will dwell in the house of the Lord in heaven forever and ever. Amen.