

“The Lamb Who Would Be Shepherd”
Revelation 7:9-17

May 12,2019

4th Sunday of Easter – Confirmation Day

One of the charges leveled against Christianity which is often used as a reason for the decline in its popularity is that it has become soft and weak. Churches are places for women, children, and senior citizens. Popular contemporary Christian music and worship are often based on emotion and feeling, rather than confessing and proclaiming the Word of God. Some have referred to the songs sung in modern Christian worship as “Jesus is my boyfriend” songs, meaning that many songs could pass for secular love songs if the name Jesus was removed and “boyfriend” was inserted in its place. Such talk might lead some people to believe that Karl Marx was right when he said that religion was “the opium of the people”. Christianity is just something nice and soothing to make us feel better and has no strength or power to help us with the real world and its problems.

Some of the images used in church may also give the impression that Christianity is weak and soft. Nowhere is this more evident than today, the 4th Sunday of Easter, which is often referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday. Images of cute sheep and tender young shepherds fill our minds on this day. But are our minds filled accurately? Our text for today from the book of Revelation speaks both of Lamb and Shepherd, but in different ways.

The word, lamb produces the image of soft and cuddly animal. It’s not even a full-grown sheep, but a lamb. Since it is not a full-grown animal, it joins the ranks of kitten and puppy in the listing of cute animals. Lambs and sheep are best known for being stupid, for wandering away, and for getting killed.

The youth, weakness, and stupidity of lambs project a weak, rather negative, image in many people’s minds. For example, sporting teams often name their teams after animals. You have the Detroit Lions, the Chicago Bears, the Seattle Seahawks, and so on – real powerful names. Even in our own state, we have the Grizzlies and the Bobcats. – also powerful names. Do you think our universities would ever choose the name Montana Lambs or Montana State Sheep? I don’t think so.

The occupation of shepherd suffers from the same image problem. They may be seen equally weak and childlike. This may come from the fact that little boys play the shepherds in the Christmas Eve service. This image is reinforced in Scripture. When Samuel came to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem to choose one of his sons to become the next king of Israel, he only interviewed the strong and manly sons of Jesse. David, who would eventually become the next King, was not even thought of as being a possibility to become king. After all, he was just a boy taking care of the sheep in the pasture.

It’s no wonder that a shepherd may be just a boy. After all, what does a shepherd have to do? Although it may be an oversimplification to say so, but most of what a shepherd does is sitting around, watching lambs and sheep graze, and leading them to

find grass and water. Sure, an occasional lion or wolf might present itself as a problem, but nothing very often.

If our Lord Jesus Christ is to be compared with a tiny lamb in terms of our salvation and a boyish shepherd in terms of leading us to that salvation, does that give you much confidence and hope for the future? Are you willing to entrust your entire eternal well-being to someone who is compared with a lamb or a shepherd?

In our text, Jesus is first referred to as “the Lamb”. This does seem to be a weak and rather soft way of presenting Jesus. Jesus’ life, ministry and death appear to be weak as well. Jesus lived in poverty, ministered as a servant, and died as a criminal.

However, this was no accident. Jesus voluntarily set aside or did not fully use His power as the Son of God while He was here on earth. As Paul said to the Philippians, “Though [Jesus] was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of the servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:5-9) it takes real strength, not weakness, and courage, not fear, to do such a thing.

Jesus, the Lamb, showed more strength in how he carried out his ministry. The lamb was very important in the worship life of Israel. In the most important Jewish festival, the Passover, each family was required to choose a lamb from the flock, a one-year-old male without flaw or defect, and offer up this animal’s life as the sacrifice for the sins of that particular family. This sacrificial system was a preview and prophecy of what the Messiah would come to do on a much larger scale.

It was John the Baptist who proclaimed of Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The sins of a typical family would be a heavy load indeed. But Jesus would not bear the sins of a single family or even a single nation or even a single point in time. Jesus was the Lamb sent by God to take away the sins of the entire world of all times and places.

That is quite a load. It is not for the physically weak or the weak at heart. Yet Jesus, the Lamb of God, bore that load. And he did it in the midst of rejection and unbelief. Isaiah, the prophet said, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.... All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – everyone – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

It is we who are the stupid, weak, wandering sheep. We have ignored our loving God, wandered away from the safety of His flock, and done our own will. We fully deserve for God to let us go and suffer the consequences of our own action. Yet, He does not. He does not punish us for our sin as we deserve. Instead, He loads up all sin upon Jesus – your sin, my sin, the sins of all who lived prior to us, the sins of all who live at the present time with us, and the sins of all people who will ever live after us. He has carried our sin, our grief, and our sorrow to the cross, a heavy, overwhelming load. Yet Jesus, the strong Lamb, carries it all.

The sacrifice for all sin for all time is made there on the cross. The Lamb of God is offered to God for the sins of the world. The mighty and fearful wrath of a holy God is poured out on sin. We have no reference point for this kind of thing and the idea of

God having wrath and anger is downplayed in modern times. But the wrath of God is a fearful and horrible thing. Think of the movie Raiders of the Lost Ark but on a far greater scale.

The sin of every human being is punished in a single human being, Jesus Christ on that cross. However, the physical death on the altar of the cross is not the worst part of the punishment. Rather, on the cross, Jesus experiences, not only physical death, but eternal death when He is separated from His Father who turns away from His only begotten Son who has become sin for us. As horrible as crucifixion is, it cannot hold a candle to the wrath of God. In enduring the wrath of God as an individual is horrific and beyond our comprehension. Enduring the wrath of God for the sin of the entire world is more horrific and beyond that. As Isaiah says, "But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed."

Being THIS Lamb is not for the weak or faint of heart. This Lamb is stronger than the strong. This Lamb is mightier than the mighty. By offering the full and perfect sacrifice for all of your sins and my sins and for the sins of all, He has earned forgiveness for our sin and peace with God. We shall pass through the great tribulation, troubles as a result of our sin and troubles as a result of living in a sinful world. We shall wash our robes in the blood of the Lamb. But how shall we get to this final destination? Who will lead us?

This is where the shepherd comes in. "Shepherd" may not be familiar term or concept in our increasingly urban world. In sign language, the concept is three signs connected – "person", "cares for", "sheep." So, a shepherd is one who cares for the sheep by watching out for them at all costs. Many shepherds were faithful, but some would not always care for the sheep. Some would abandon the sheep in face of opposition. Some would lead the sheep astray.

Jesus is called the "good" Shepherd because he is all in for the sheep and not for Himself. He cares for you by making you lie down in green pastures, leading you beside the still waters, restoring your soul, and leading you on right paths. He will get you through this life. He promises us that, as His sheep follow His voice and hear His words, they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of His hand. Anyone, of course, could leave Him, but no one shall ever be able to take us from Him.

I heard a pastor preach on this text using an illustration of a teacher he had in middle school who was correcting his writing style and warning him not to mix his metaphors. Doing so confuses the message and lacks clarity. The teacher held up his essay and said, "A memory can burn deeply in your mind and a memory can wash over you all at once. But it can't do both at the same time. Fire burns and water washes. You have to make a choice." The pastor shared his reaction to this criticism by saying that the memory of that day, "burns deeply in my mind even today and its washing over me right now."

Some think that the Word of God is mixing its metaphors here of Jesus as Lamb and Jesus as shepherd. By doing so, the word of God confuses the message and lacks clarity. We must choose one or the other. There certainly appears to be mixed metaphors here. The text says that "the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their

shepherd.” A lamb becoming a shepherd is like a patient becoming a doctor. It is assumed that one cannot do both.

But this is different. There are two pictures here and our Lord fulfills both. Jesus, the Lamb, won salvation for us all by His sacrifice on the cross – His death and resurrection. Jesus, as the Shepherd, has led us to receive that salvation and will lead us to the culmination of that salvation in heaven.

When we arrive to that great multitude in heaven by the work of the Lamb and the guidance of the Shepherd, we shall hunger no more, neither the thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike us nor any scorching heat. We will be free, free from all of the suffering, pain, rejection, and even death. As we stand around the throne of God, the Lamb will be our shepherd and will guide us to springs of living water – life everlasting – and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

In closing our worship services, we usually use one of two blessings: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious unto you; the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.” Or “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” There is one other blessing in Scripture which especially fits for a day like today. It comes to us from the book of Hebrews. “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”