

A Shepherd of Orphans

Jesus said: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." (John 14:18)

Beloved in Christ: Welcome to Good Shepherd Sunday! Today God the Father reminds us that we are the sheep of His pasture, a collective herd of two-legged, like-minded creatures in need of a shepherd. Today may look very different from what you are used to seeing and hearing. You see a different face and hear a different voice than what you've been seeing and hearing. While the world has been tipped upside down, you have become accustomed to heeding the governor's voice, carefully discerning directives from the President, even tuning in to the latest news from radio or television personalities. These voices get our attention. They are voices large and in charge of a great many scattered sheep.

In these unsettled and unsettling times, a voice you have trusted and heeded over these many years as sheep of Peace-pasture is today no longer heard. The herd is here, but the herdsman is nowhere in the house. Webster reminds us that the word for pastor is grounded in the noble vocation of herdsman. As the shepherd leads his sheep with the familiarity of his voice, so the pastor shepherds the flock of God's sheep with his distinct voice; that distinct voice calls out to each sheep by name and lead them out. Jesus teaches us that the voice and the speaking of a personal name go together. You're not a number with Jesus, nor do you have to engage an automated series of options to get His attention.

So what's in store now for you? You are sheep without a shepherd, orphaned sheep in danger of losing your identity and purpose in the midst of pandemic pandemonium. You long to lie down in green pastures and drink from still waters, but for now those seem very distant realities. Now it's a valley of dry bones, and the proverbial still waters are eerily murky and stirred. We're not of the woods yet. Orphanages are poor alternatives to home sweet home. You may be reluctant to venture out of your shelter-in-place. There's safety in what we know, but sheep are not meant for confinement. Sheep are grazing creatures, and shepherds go where the sheep encounter the green pastures and still waters they need for life.

So you and I go where the Good Shepherd lead us...together we go where His solitary voice calls and gathers. Word and Sacraments bring calm and restoration to mind, body, and soul. Jesus brings comfort in His preaching. "I will not leave you as

orphans; I will come to you." And He does so in spite of our fears and misgivings. He does so in spite of our vacant pastorate. Jesus comes to you when you are most vulnerable and afraid, when you are scattered and homeless. Calling His own sheep by name and leading them out, your Good Shepherd is really and truly present among you. Though hidden in the voice of a stranger, you recognize Him speaking by faith. Though disguised in bread and wine, you take and eat of His true body for the forgiveness of sins. You drink deeply from the well-spring of His shed blood in sacramental drink. Though the foreign voice of a strange pastor speaks absolution of your sins, in reality you cling in faith to those words spoken in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

We are in this vacancy together (sheep and shepherd), and together (God willing) we will get through it because the promise of God is sure. For us He gave over His life unto death. For us He was laid bare on the altar of the cross. For us He shed His blood and rested in the tomb, but death was not His undoing. Therefore Jesus alone is our true and only Good Shepherd. He alone brings us this assurance and no one else: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep"* (John 10:1, 2). Furthermore the orphans cling in faith to this word of promise: *"All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the Door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture"* (John 10:8, 9).

Thieves and robbers have seized upon fear and uncertainty. They cloak themselves in all manner of sheep's clothing only to steal and kill and destroy. But your Good Shepherd has overruled them in His death and resurrection. Your Lord has come that all His beloved sheep may have the assurance of life and live it with abundant joy. What a most fitting and provocative text for your next pastor to preach to you upon his installation! *"All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them!"* (verse 8). I should like to hear what he might say to us in regards to this. Perhaps he might even remind us that a thief and robber inherited the kingdom of Paradise from Jesus' lips as he hung on the cross. But that's for another sermon, another day.

Today the door stands wide open. The gates of Paradise lost and locked with the kiss of death are burst open on account of Christ crucified and risen again for you. His voice still calls you forth by name out of the valley of dry bones you tread. His breath still breathes the breath of life into you, and the demons flee away when He speaks. In Holy Baptism you and I enter through the door of life in order to be saved. Saved from eternal death that would steal away and kill and destroy us, Jesus leads us as pastor

and people to green pastures and still waters. He does this now...today in Word and Sacraments, preaching and absolution.

You will want to look elsewhere in your sheepish stupor. You'll be tempted to trust stranger voices. You will look for another way to climb in that relies on your own good works and corrupted wills, but then you'll be genuine orphans on your own. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby one must be saved (Acts 4:12). That includes your own name, and mine, and any pope or bishop on earth. There is but One Door—that's Jesus! Still you'll be tempted to go it alone. You'll be prone to wander off hither and yon away from the Shepherd's crook. He'll willingly leave the ninety-nine to find you. He'll find you and put you on His shoulders and bear you home. He'll do it...indeed, has done it to win you back from death and the grave through the forgiveness of your sins and mine. What a Good Shepherd we have in Jesus!

As Jesus was preaching to His disciples about threats to the sheepfold from thieves and robbers and the voice of strangers, the evangelist John gives us this one line reaction: *"This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what He was saying to them"* (John 10:6). As it was with those disciples, so it is with us. We hear what Jesus says, but Old Adam doesn't make sense of it. We lack the wisdom to understand, to truly grasp the meaning of these things as they are intended to be understood. It's not that we don't want to listen. The problem is that the sayings of Jesus require faith to believe, and faith is foreign to the Old Adam. Faith is borne out of the Word as the Holy Spirit breathes upon the faithful. It's not that Jesus was unclear about what He was saying. It's not that Jesus was speaking in a language they did not know. They did not understand what He was saying to them because they didn't make the connection. The disciples didn't recognize the connection between Jesus and the shepherd, between sheep and the faithful, between discipleship and the voice of the Master.

What of us? Do we always understand everything Jesus says? Do we recognize everything He does, or are these things often hidden from us as they were from them? Even now as we have the advantage of hindsight and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit post-Pentecost, we often struggle with Jesus' words. Old Adam is diametrically opposed to the new man. Part of us resents the implication that we are four-legged, woolly farm animals needing to be tended, and spoken to, and led forth by a Savior. We resent the inference because Old Adam is stubborn and selfish and fiercely independent. But part of us is the new, regenerated, enlightened creation that is borne of baptismal waters. By faith we understand and believe. By faith we know the voice of the Shepherd and follow. By faith the stranger's voice is unknown and unrecognizable. So as saint and sinner simultaneously embedded in one sheep, you and I identify with Je-

sus' preaching and also struggle to understand and believe. St. Paul sheds considerable light on this schizophrenia when he writes by holy inspiration: *"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out"* (Romans 7:15-18). This tension that dwells in us is a mark of the Christian life.

If we resent the implication that we are sheep, then it follows that we have no need of a shepherd. But since we are sheep (Jesus says so), then it follows that His voice is our saving grace in the midst of grave dangers embedded in strange voices. The Vennite in the Order of Matins is a continual reminder that every morning is Good Shepherd Sunday for the faithful. Together we sing this profound confession of faith: "For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand" (LSB, 220). The world seeks to snatch and scatter. We have seen firsthand the result of this snatching and scattering in recent weeks that has left us isolated and distant. Sheep never do well when they are singled out and separated from the flock. There's strength in numbers, and security in the lone voice of the shepherd. As people of His pasture and sheep of His hand, you and I are part of something far greater than ourselves. By name Jesus calls us in the one flock of His holy Christian Church. By grace He knows us as saint and sinner, willingly laying down His life for the sheep. Though scattered physically, Christ Jesus gathers confessionally as one flock and one shepherd.

Today may look very different than what you are used to seeing and hearing. It will take time to get accustomed to a new voice, a stranger's face. You'll be skeptical and apprehensive, like sheep react to a stranger's voice. "A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (John 10:5). Still ears of faith will recognize and understand in the stranger's voice the calling of the Good Shepherd in so far as that voice preaches the Word in season and out of season. Those ears of faith and eyes will see in the hidden things of God a revelation that passes all understanding. "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.