

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Laymen and pastors hear the Gospel for today differently. Laymen tend to hear about the gentle, loving, self-sacrificing Savior, pictured for us as the Good Shepherd. As a pastor, I hear Jesus, the chief Shepherd, describing the difference between Himself and all those who serve unfaithfully as under-shepherds of His flock. You hear comfort, I hear job description. I also hear comfort, but I am confronted by the image of the hireling.

Now I know that Jesus was not merely saying either of the things we hear. Surely, He meant us to see those messages, but He was also connecting Himself to the prophets, to Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel who spoke of the unfaithful shepherds of Israel - both the kings and the priests, and who declared that He would be our Shepherd - and that He would be a good and faithful Shepherd. Jesus wasn't just being pastoral (in the sense of pastures and countryside), He was taking His stand as the fulfilment of the prophecies, such as this one from Ezekiel 34:

For thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. . . . I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord GOD. "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment. . . .

“Therefore, I will deliver My flock, and they will no longer be a prey . . . . Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God.”

The Good Shepherd is the work of God. He is the one who does not run from danger - any danger - but pays the price. What that tells us is that it's not that Jesus didn't want to flee. He told His disciples that He was sorrowful to the point of death – He didn't want to go to the cross. He cried out earnestly to His Father in heaven that if there was any other way, He wanted to avoid the cross. But He is the Good Shepherd. He is not a hireling, but the Owner of the sheep. So, He could not run. He could not deny the need of the flock. He could not take care of Himself first. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. So Jesus died – on the cross – in your place and mine. He died for His sheep because they were His and He is the Good Shepherd.

And if He is the Shepherd, we must be the sheep. It is informative to consider the image that Jesus leaves with us about who we are. People will often have this wonderful, warm feeling as they consider the picture, but the picture they have in mind is the one where Jesus is holding the sweet little lamb in His arms. That is not a picture of sheep. That is a picture of Jesus. Sheep are another thing altogether.

Just think of the phrase, “a bunch of sheep.” It is not a positive image. Sheep are, in fact, among the least intelligent of animals. They will wander from safety into danger without a thought. They will go where they cannot get back from without assistance, repeatedly. That is what makes the sheep a perfect image for God's people – and the Shepherd the perfect image for God Himself. Like sheep, we allow ourselves to be drawn away from what is wholesome and good, many

times, by our expectation of some pleasure, some joy, some “greener grass” on the other side of the fence.

Jesus’ sheep hear His voice and follow Him. We follow Him into our graves trusting in His power to raise us from the grave to eternal life. We follow with lives of faithfulness and holiness, by His help and power. We will follow Him in His resurrection, also by His help and power. During this life, we hear His voice where He has placed it, in the called servants of the Word who are faithful. We follow by faithfully doing what He has given us to do. We believe in Him, and we cling to His Word and His truth – that is sound doctrine – and we follow His voice.

Others don’t. That is an unfortunate truth. Jesus said that His sheep hear His voice. Those who cannot hear it are not His sheep. Those who will not listen are not His sheep. Those who will not believe the things His voice says are not His sheep. Those who will not follow Jesus are not His sheep. In the days of Jesus, shepherds led their sheep, they did not drive them like in a cattle drive. As it turns out, you cannot drive sheep as one might drive a herd of cows. You must lead them. Shepherds of old would meet and their flocks would mingle, but when it came time to part, the shepherds would simply walk away singing their song or calling out their call, and their sheep would each hear his shepherd’s voice and follow the right shepherd because he was their shepherd, whom they knew and trusted. Jesus’ sheep hear his voice. He said so. Those who do not hear and follow Him are simply and sadly not His sheep.

But Jesus is the Good Shepherd. That means you are safe. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He will keep you in all your ways. He will guide and guard and bless you. He will not desert you in the hour of need, because He is not merely a hired hand. You

need have no fear of life or death. He is Your Shepherd. He has loved you to death and into everlasting life, and He will keep you until you arrive at the heavenly sheepfold.

You and I are the other sheep that Jesus mentioned in our text. We are the ones whom He has added to His flock. Ancient Israel was His flock. We have been added. He knew that we were like sheep – not able to understand, and not able to sense the danger we were in, and not able at all to help ourselves, so He has done it, worked our salvation on the cross, and has spoken His love to us in Word and Sacrament. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

There are still many false shepherd and hirelings out in the world today. They are those who have their agendas. Some want to build a large flock that they can lead wherever they will. Some use the sheep for their egos, or they are serving another who would be shepherd, but is not and cannot be. Some just want to fleece their flock. Whatever their goal or agenda, only the Good Shepherd has forgiveness and life and salvation. Only the Good Shepherd can bless and only the Good Shepherd can save.

Only the Good Shepherd is the One promised in ancient prophecy, "I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord GOD. "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment." He has sought you. He has gathered you together into His flock. He has healed your deepest wound - sin and death. And He gives you the rest - the peace and joy of the Gospel. Only those who are too strong and too comfortable to listen to His call are in danger. Those He will destroy.

So, listen to His voice. Be careful to hear His voice and not another. And when you have heard His voice, and you will know that it is His voice, follow Him. Do not let anything, not fame or wealth, not family or friends, not pleasures, or fear, or troubles, or sorrows, or any other thing stand in your way, but follow Him. And be at peace in whatever circumstance you may find yourself, for the Jesus Christ, your Shepherd, is the Good Shepherd.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.  
Amen.