

St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
April 25, 2021

**JESUS, THE GOOD SHEPHERD, WAS ABSOLUTELY COMMITTED TO HIS SHEEP**

John 10: 10-11 "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."

If you ever visit Staffordshire, England, and go to what is known as Beacon Park, you'll see a statue of Edward Smith. Who is Edward Smith? No, he's not one of my ancestors, at least as far as I know. Edward Smith was actually the captain of the Titanic when it made its maiden voyage and hit an iceberg and sank in the North Atlantic on April 14, 1912. In that tragic sea disaster, 2,223 people, including Captain Smith, lost their lives. Survivors gave conflicting reports on how Smith spent his last minutes. Some said he jumped into the sea at the last moment. Others had him rescuing a child, while most think he was standing in the ship's wheelhouse as the Titanic went under. While we will probably never know the full truth of the matter, we do know that Captain Edward Smith, feeling responsible for the loss of his ship, but especially for those 2200 lives, went down with his vessel.

There have been other examples of great sacrifice and heroics. We may think of men who gave their lives fighting at the Alamo knowing that they would probably all be killed. More recently, of course, we think of all the first responders at the 9/11 attacks, especially those brave people that fought the terrorists on Flight 93, knowing that their chances of surviving were slim indeed.

On the other hand, "going down with the ship," so to speak, is not always necessary. Sometimes living to fight another day may be the better part of valor. A young quick-stop store clerk was being interviewed after he had tried to fight off with a baseball bat a gun-wielding robber. The store clerk was shot but survived. When asked if he had learned anything or if he

would do something differently in the future, the young man said, “Yes, the next time a robber comes in, I’m going to just give him the money.”

Yes, in fact, that’s what I’d tell my children or anyone’s children to do when facing an armed assailant. Give them the money. The money’s not worth dying for. Don’t get me wrong—there are some things definitely worth dying for, like family, friends, helpless women and children, freedom, and faith. But there are a lot of worldly things that people die for everyday that simply aren’t worth it.

All of this takes me to the scripture passage around which this message is built. When I read Jesus’ familiar words: “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep,”—now you think about that. What human being is going to die for a bunch of sheep? If a shepherd loses his sheep—even if they are as close to him as pets – he can still get another flock. It may take him some time and cost him a few shekels, but it is certainly better than dying for the sheep. Is there anything that can make a lamb, no matter how cute it is, worth the life of a shepherd? Most of us think not.

Yet, our text tells us that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, does just that. The innocent Son of God died for the sheep. Consider this for a moment. I know that none of you are now shepherds. Of course, I’m not a shepherd of real sheep either, but a number of us one year ago studied a book by Phillip Keller entitled, “A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23” and as a result we learned at least a few things about sheep and shepherding.

For one thing, I know that sheep are not like dogs. If the dog’s master dies or is killed, the dog may miss him—even do the canine version of mourning for him. But sheep do not mourn the passing of their shepherd. Yes, they may know their shepherd’s voice, and they may follow him, but to a sheep, shepherds are pretty much interchangeable and replaceable. Give them a few days, and the sheep will forget their old shepherd and switch their loyalties to a new one. That’s just the way they are. As long as they are cared for, protected, and fed, they will accept a new shepherd.

The Good Shepherd dies for the sheep. Does that seem right? Does that make sense? Real sheep are not thankful. Sheep are not appreciative. Sheep do not present awards which

say, “To the world’s greatest Shepherd.” Real sheep may not even realize that they have a shepherd on duty caring for them. Should shepherds really be dying for their sheep?

But dying for the sheep is what Jesus was born into this world to do. Go with the shepherds of Bethlehem and look into His manger. According to Luke 2, you see a cute and cuddly Child, but long ago Jesus’ redemptive plan and His passion had been determined and decreed. Long before His conception and birth, Jesus had been designated as the Good Shepherd who would die for the sheep. Now, why do we speak this way? We speak of Jesus’ contemporaries as being sheep because the Bible compared them to sheep first. The Bible recognized that God’s people had often acted like a herd of sheep—and worse. When Jesus walked this earth, most of the sheep He encountered didn’t thank Him. If He healed 10 lepers, nine forgot to show any kind of appreciation. His boyhood friends and neighbors in Nazareth never gave their favorite Son a parade or set aside a day in His honor. Yet these are some of the very sheep for whom Jesus came to die.

The pillars of the community never gave the Savior any applause or accolades. The best they could do was call Him names and try to discredit Him. The religious leaders of Jerusalem in His day didn’t set Him up with a classroom in the temple and encourage Him to share the wisdom of God. Instead, they tried to twist His teachings and misinterpret His God-given messages of salvation. If He called them to repentance, they replied with rebellion. If He told them to follow God’s laws, they substituted their own laws. If He told them to trust Him, believe on Him, come to Him, rely on Him, they turned down His invitations with a snarl and a sneer. Yes, they were sheep—and actually worse than sheep.

I say “worse than sheep” because to the best of our knowledge, real sheep aren’t filled with hatred for their shepherd. Real sheep don’t plot how they can murder their shepherd. Sheep don’t lie about their shepherd so that they can have him murdered. Sheep don’t laugh when their shepherd is dying, nor do they breathe a sigh of relief when He passes away. Sheep don’t put a guard on their shepherd’s tomb; they don’t put a forbidding seal upon His grave. Sheep don’t do those things, but Jesus, the Good Shepherd, experienced every one of those

nasty reactions from the flocks He had come to rescue and redeem. Even so, those are the sheep for whom the Good Shepherd came to die.

Oh, and by the way, we are also the sheep for whom Jesus came to die. That's right—every last one of us—all people. And don't get offended when I compare sheep with sinful humanity. If anyone should be upset with that comparison, it ought to be the sheep. After all, sheep don't wage aggressive wars on each other. They don't murder and steal from one another. They don't gossip about each other. They may be envious of each other's pasture, but they don't spend their waking hours plotting on how to steal it. Sheep don't kidnap each other; they don't sell drugs to lambs. Sheep don't have drive-by shootings, and no sheep has ever attacked a classroom filled with kids. Yes, we humans are significantly different from sheep, but the difference isn't all that complimentary to the human race. Even so, 20 centuries ago, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, lived His life for, and gave His life up so that the sheep of the whole human race might be saved.

And still, in 20 centuries, we haven't gotten any better. Jesus says, "My sheep hear My voice and they follow Me," but many of the world's sheep still reject what His voice says. They still live their lives as if the Savior had never existed and they still try to convince themselves that they are in control of their daily and eternal destinies.

No, the sheep haven't gotten better or wiser or more loyal. Just like their ancestors, many of today's sheep still rebel. If the Shepherd gives them a command, they say, "Those words are for sheep long ago; they don't apply to us." If He tells them right from wrong, the world's modern sheep say, "There is no such thing as right from wrong." If the Savior says, "I'm going to live and die for you," many modern sheep say, "Jesus never lived, and if He did live, He didn't die or rise to save me, because I don't need to be saved." And when it comes to following the Good Shepherd, many contemporary sheep seem to take great pride in seeing how far they can wander from the Shepherd's care and compassion. Just the same, these are the sheep Jesus came to save. It may not make sense, but these are the sheep for whom Jesus laid down His life.

Please pay attention to those words: The Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. The text does NOT say, “the Shepherd’s life is taken from Him by bandits or wild animals or atheists or unbelievers.” The text doesn’t say that the Shepherd’s life is ripped from Him by doubters and pseudo-intellectuals. The text doesn’t say that the Shepherd lays down His life reluctantly or with great regret, as if it were something He was compelled to do. The text doesn’t say that the Shepherd’s life was stolen from Him.

No, it’s absolutely clear: the Shepherd has laid down His life for the sheep. When Jesus was crucified on Golgotha, He was actually in complete control of the situation. He Himself had said earlier, “No man takes my life from me, but I lay it down Myself. I have the power to lay it down and the power to take it up again” (John 10: 18). Being true to God, and without sin of His own, Jesus actually had two wills Himself to die. He willingly gave up the ghost because He loves the sheep. He died in unjust circumstances and in great pain because His Father was keeping His promise to send a Substitute, Someone who would offer Himself to save us. That was the role Jesus filled and fulfilled because He loves the sheep. He loves us more than He loves His own life. Jesus did what He did gladly and willingly, even though His sacrifice is not always appreciated by the world.

Seeing the Shepherd lay down His life, any reasonable, rational observer must be impressed by a love so limitless, a compassion so encompassing, a sacrifice so self-denying. The Shepherd dies for the sheep. Seeing the completeness of the Savior’s commitment, even human sheep ought to get sensible and be impressed that God has done something we would never do. The Son of God, higher above us than we are above any real sheep, willingly and without any reservation, died so that the flock may live. He suffered so that we might have salvation; He was tortured so that we might avoid torment. He rose from the dead so that those who believe on Him would be freed from the fear of death, so that those who are His might live forever. And for such a great cause, the Father decreed that this good and gracious Shepherd would die for the sheep.

For this undeserved act of God’s great kindness, every church throughout the world should be filled to overflowing with grateful souls. Great pipe organs should be drowned out by

the billions of voices raised in praise to the Good Shepherd. Every highway ought to be clogged by the feet, bicycles, cars, buses, helicopters, and planes of those going out to help others see their Shepherd - Savior. That's the way it SHOULD be. But as Matthew says (20:16; 22:14), "Many are called; few are chosen." "The field is white unto harvest." The world is filled with sheep and only a relative few will be able by faith to recognize the Shepherd, hear His voice, and give thanks because they believe in the Good Shepherd who has laid down His life for them.

By the grace of God and thanks to the call of God's Holy Spirit, you all know this Good Shepherd and believe in this one and only Savior Jesus, who has laid down His life for you.

Amen.