

THE LORD IS OUR SHEPHERD
Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday), 2019
Psalm 23

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

- The text for our sermon today is the Introit from before, Psalm 23: ¹ **The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not lack anything.**
² **He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me to water where there is quiet.**
³ **He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.**
⁴ **Even though I walk through the valley of deep darkness, I shall fear no evil. For You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**
⁵ **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.**
⁶ **Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Psalm 23 is the most familiar and best-loved of the psalms. It describes God's loving care for His people in terms borrowed from the work of a shepherd. This picture was especially meaningful for David because of his own experience as a shepherd. There are many other Old Testament passages that describe the Lord as the shepherd of Israel,¹ and we have all heard Jesus Himself say: "*I AM the Good Shepherd*," (John 10:11). The shepherd imagery in the Gospel is unsurpassed for comfort in the midst of the challenges life throws at us.

Being one of the most familiar and best-loved of the Psalms, it may give the impression that being a Christian is all soft, warm, and fuzzy business. After all, most pictures that hang on the wall show Jesus as a loving shepherd with His flock of sheep peacefully grazing nearby, or with Him carrying a lost lamb slung across His shoulders.

No doubt, we certainly take comfort in the fact that the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ Himself, is always watching over us, but surely the language of Psalm 23 must bring most comfort in the face of real difficulty and evil. It is comforting to know that the Lord "**makes me lie down in green pastures,**" and that "**He leads me to water where there is quiet.**" However, this is right smack in the *midst* of "**the valley of deep darkness,**" of "**evil,**" and "**enemies.**"

We live in a world of deep darkness, where there is evil and numerous enemies. It's been this way since the fall of man into sin, and today we find it increasingly difficult to let our light shine in an ever-increasing godless society. Christians today - even sporting stars - who publicly warns about the dangers of sin and unrepentant wicked living - when such people speak up against the **evil** world by quoting Scripture and simply asking people to repent and to turn to Jesus for forgiveness, they get heckled by their **enemies**.

The Apostle Peter once wrote that life as a child of God is not an easy task. He spoke about "*bearing pain patiently when suffering unjustly, or even suffering for doing good,*" (1 Peter 2:19-20). Bearing a cross for the sake of the Gospel may be difficult, but it is inevitable in this world.

The result of this heckling is that those who trust and worship the Lord Jesus end up feeling and looking like a shorn sheep. That is, they are cut, left dazed, bleeding and naked by the way people react against their message. This is nothing new. Writing to a young pastor named Timothy, Paul said, "*Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,*" (2 Timothy 3:12). Jesus had predicted this when He stated that "*'A slave is not greater than his master'! If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you,*" (John 15:20). This does not mean that we must seek persecution or conduct ourselves in a way that antagonises. Paul sought to "*become all things to all people, that in every way I may save some,*" (1 Corinthians 9:22). Yet persecutions came, because of Christ. So it always will be when Christ is preached and lived. However, the early Christians in their persecutions rejoiced "*that they had been thought worthy of being dishonoured for the sake of the Name,*" (Acts 5:41), that is, suffering for the sake of Jesus and His truth.

However, not only may we suffer from our earthly enemies, but **evil** also comes from our greatest enemy, Satan himself. We can expect him to attack, and he does so in any number of ways.

¹ Two of the most important are Isaiah 40:11 and Ezekiel 34:11-16

One such way, however, is to encourage us to let the Word of God take a back seat in our own lives. Not only does he make us afraid to share the message of Christ with others, but he will also do his best to keep us so occupied with other things in life that we don't have time to learn more about the grace of Christ for ourselves by the regular reading of God's Word. He will also place obstacles in our paths that stop us from regularly coming to God's place of worship to gather around Word and Sacrament. Again, he will do all he can to stop those who are more than able, from attending Bible Studies and other church events, by offering them something that is far more pleasing to do, such as staying home for entertainment, or relaxation, or a number of other things.

The point is, Satan will do all he can to stop us from living a Christian life so that our love for the Lord soon grows cold, and, of course, he also keeps reminding us of how sinful we are. He whispers in our ears, "*Did God really say...?*" trying to make us doubt our faith. In our everyday lives, he wants us to listen to his voice, to give in to temptation, and will even try to make us think that we really are too evil to be saved. There really is nothing more frightening than a conscience that begins to think: "*I am too wicked to be saved.*" We know that Satan is a liar² and that what he speaks is utter rubbish. That is why we must listen to what God says, who cannot lie. John reminds us that "*The blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin,*" (1 John 1:7). Even in life's most frightening situations, we can be confident that **the LORD is (our) shepherd** who makes us **fear no evil** and who rescues us from **the presence of (our) enemies** because He has delivered us from Satan, sin, and eternal death because there is not one sin that hasn't been accounted for by Him.

Thanks be to God, therefore, that His Son, Jesus Christ, even though He is the Good Shepherd, also knows what it is like to be shorn - to be cut, left dazed, bleeding and naked from the attacks of men and Satan. He knows because He too "*was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief,*" (Is. 53:3), and "*who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin,*" (Heb. 4:15). The world rejected Him when He walked this earth, and the world today *continues* to reject Him. Satan tempted Jesus, as he tempts us today. But here's the paradox: Jesus, the naked, bleeding, shorn sheep, is also "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29).

Jesus is that Lamb of God who has come to give Himself as the sacrifice to win forgiveness for a sinful world. He is the Passover Lamb whose blood saves us from death.³ He is the lamb of the daily offering,⁴ the burnt offering - "without defect"⁵ - the fellowship offering.⁶ He is the sin offering through which we receive forgiveness.⁷

The closer sheep get to being shorn, the less noise they make. By the time the shearer has them in his hand, shearing off the wool, they are dead silent. Christ was silent in the face of His accusers, "*Although He was oppressed and He was afflicted, He did not open His mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and, as a ewe is silent before those who shear off her wool, so He did not open His mouth,*" (Is. 53:7). Again, from Peter's First Letter we read: "²² *Jesus did not commit any sin and no deceit was found in His mouth.* ²³ *When others insulted Him, He did not insult them in return. When He suffered, He did not make threats, but handed it over to Him who judges justly,*" (1 Peter 2:22-23).

Jesus silently bore our sin to death. He is the great Passover Lamb by whose blood we stand forgiven in the presence of a holy God. He "*entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption,*" (Heb. 9:12b). Blood was important in the sacrifices performed by Israel's high priests⁸ because blood was a vivid reminder that God demanded death for sin. However, unlike the high priests, Christ did not bring the blood of goats and calves but *His own blood*, holy and precious because it was the blood of the God-man. He did not have to come year after year with His blood as the high priest had to. "*Once for all*" He offered and thereby "*obtained eternal redemption.*" To redeem means to set free by paying the price. Forever in heaven, Christ points to His blood as having freed us from all sin and guilt and suffering in this life.

Furthermore, there was nothing accidental about Christ's suffering, and it wasn't finally any man who brought it about. Jesus said to Pilate: "*You would not have any authority at all over Me if it had been given to you from above... I lay down my life, in order that I may take it up again,*" (John 19:11; 10:17). Neither is there anything accidental about our suffering. Job says, "*Although He kills me, I shall hope in Him,*" (13:15). Looking beyond this life to the eternal life to come, Job's primary concern was not his physical suffering but his relationship with his God. We can all learn a valuable lesson from Job in that regard.

² John 8:44

³ Exodus 12:1-13

⁴ Exodus 29:38-41

⁵ Leviticus 1:10

⁶ Leviticus 3:6-7

⁷ Leviticus 4:32-35

⁸ Leviticus 17:11

Whenever we face the shears in life – pain, suffering, and persecution, we must know that the Good Shepherd is the one in control. Even when it looks as though God’s purposes are hidden, nevertheless, He is working His will in our lives for our good. And what good is that? He is allowing these afflictions to happen so as to drive us to hold all the more tightly to “His **rod and staff**,” which Luther rightly called God’s precious Word.

After all, as His dear sheep, in His precious Word, we hear of “**water where there is quiet**,” which reminds us of our Baptism. When David says, “**He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake**,” these words remind us of His forgiving Word of absolution. When David says that the Lord prepares “**a table before me in the presence of my enemies**,” we are reminded of the blessed Sacrament of the Altar where there is victory over sin, death, and Satan.

Because Jesus is our Good Shepherd, “**Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever**.” In heaven, we shall feast in safety forever because we shall be secure from Satan and all our enemies. No one will ever be able to deprive us of the joys of eternal life, which can never be interrupted or lost.

May that great Shepherd of the Sheep, Jesus Christ Himself, continue to keep and protect us from our enemies here below, as well as give us His blessing to continue to reach out to His enemies with His Word, until we reach our heavenly home to dwell with Him for ever! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Lord our God, we praise You for Your great goodness; and for the good things that You have prepared for those who love You! Grant that we may obtain those glories, which no human being has ever seen or heard or ever thought could happen, through Jesus Christ, Your holy Servant.

We thank You for sending Christ, the Good Shepherd, into our world, to lay down His life for the sheep, to pay the price of His blood to free us from the power of Satan, from the deserved results of our sins, and from the lifelong fear of death. We praise You also for His triumphant resurrection, and for the glorious promise that all who listen to His voice and follow Him will receive eternal life.

We thank You for His pity and love for us, who were straying and helpless like sheep without a shepherd, but who are now through Your great mercy brought back to fellowship with the true Shepherd and Keeper of our souls. We thank You For Your gracious forgiveness for all our sins, for Your promise of peace, for Your assurance of salvation, for Your presence and power in our lives, and for every gift in Christ Jesus.

Enable us, by Your grace, to follow the example of Jesus, our Saviour and Head, by seeking the lost, lifting up the fallen, strengthening the weary, rescuing the straying, feeding the poor, helping the suffering, sheltering the homeless, and being sensitive to each other’s needs. May we thereby proclaim Your praises for calling us out of darkness into Your marvellous light.

Give us the voice and leadership of Jesus the Good Shepherd in all parliaments and councils of the nations, in commerce and industry, in all civic and social life.

Grant us with favourable weather, so that the earth may continue to bring forth its produce, and our farmers continue in their work of feeding the world.

Direct our way through the sin, strife, and uncertainty of this age, O Lord. Give us true faith and godly hearts. Strengthen the sick, cheer the depressed, and supply the needy, showing that You are always ready to help in every trouble. Because our eyes have seen Your salvation, when our last hour comes, release Your servants in peace, and receive us into everlasting glory.

We thank You for the life you gave to our dear brother Paul Hoopert, who is now with You in heavenly glory. Bless Paul’s family and friends with Your comfort, so that our mourning may soon be turned to joy.

All this we ask through Jesus Christ Your Son, our risen Lord and Saviour. Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 20:17-35

¹⁷ From Miletus Paul sent to Ephesus and asked the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ When they came to him, he said to them: "You know how I lived with you all the time, from the first day when I came into the province of Asia; ¹⁹ how I have served the Lord with all humility, with tears, and in the trials that I endured because the Jews plotted against me; ²⁰ how I have kept back nothing that was helpful, but have proclaimed it to you, and have taught you publicly and in your homes. ²¹ You know how I have earnestly warned both Jews and Greeks to turn to God in repentance and to believe in our Lord Jesus. ²² So now, you see, the Spirit has constrained me to go to Jerusalem. I do not know what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit keeps testifying in every city, telling me that chains and troubles are waiting for me. ²⁴ However, I do not account my life as worth anything to me. I want only to finish running my race, and to finish the ministry that I have received from the Lord Jesus, testifying to the Good News of the grace of God.

²⁵ "Now I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom, will see my face any more. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all people, ²⁷ because I have not shrunk from proclaiming to you the whole plan of God. ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and the whole flock among whom the Holy Spirit has made you bishops! You are to shepherd the church of God, which He has purchased for Himself with His own blood! ²⁹ I know that, after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from among yourselves men will stand up and say perverse things, in order to draw the disciples away after themselves. ³¹ Therefore stay awake! Remember that for three years I did not cease day and night to warn every single one with tears! ³² So now I entrust you to God and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who have been made holy. ³³ I have not coveted anyone's silver, gold, or clothes. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands have worked for my own needs and for those who were with me. ³⁵ In every way I have shown you that, by this kind of hard work, we must help the weak, and that we should remember the Words that the Lord Jesus Himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Revelation 7:9-17

⁹ After this, I looked, and saw a large crowd that no one could count, from every nation and all tribes, peoples, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes, and carrying palm-branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They called out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne, around the elders, and around the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹² saying: "Amen! Blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honour, power, and strength be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."

¹³ Then one of the elders asked me: "Who are these people who have been clothed in the white robes, and where have they come from?"

¹⁴ I replied to him, "My master, you know."

He told me: "These are the people who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore they are before the throne of God and keep serving Him day and night in His temple, and He who is sitting on the throne will shelter them with His tent. ¹⁶ They will not be hungry any more or thirsty any more. The sun will certainly not beat on them, or any scorching heat, ¹⁷ because the Lamb, who is in the middle of the throne, will be their Shepherd, and He will lead them to springs of the water of life. God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

John 10:22-30

²² Then the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem came. It was winter. ²³ Jesus was walking in the temple, in Solomon's Colonnade. ²⁴ The Jews gathered around Him and began to ask Him, "How long are You keeping us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly!"

²⁵ Jesus answered them, "I have told you, but you do not believe. The works that I am doing in the name of My Father give evidence about Me. ²⁶ However, you do not believe, because you do not belong to My sheep. ²⁷ My sheep listen to My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me, ²⁸ and I give them eternal life, and they will certainly not be lost, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of My Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."