

The Fourth Sunday of Easter – 2021

Acts 4:1-12

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

I suspect that nearly all of you have had someone who has put **your** interests above their own. That is no small thing. A parent, a spouse, a sibling, or a child – I suspect that you have been blessed by someone who truly sacrificed for you, who saw to it that you knew that you were not alone. We need others to look out for us. All of us have physical needs: shelter, medical concerns, food and household income – it is a complex world in which we live and navigating it well requires us having allies, people we can trust, people who genuinely love us. I certainly hope that you aspire to be that sort of person for others. I have a very strong suspicion that you are precisely that sort of person, that sort of ally, that sort of friend. I happen to know where that kind of character comes from.

It is God who richly and daily provides you with all that you need to support this body and life (Small Catechism). He opens His hand and He satisfies the desire of every living thing (Psalm 145:16). How well you are loved! I am exceedingly grateful for the allies in my life. I know that if I were in a bad way that there are at least a few people that I could call who would gladly come to my aid. There are some things, however, that my friends, my wife and my children can't help with. Procuring for me eternal life, providing for me spiritual protection, paying the price for my sin – no human on earth can secure these needs of mine. Thanks be to God; I have a good Shepherd. You have a good Shepherd.

You have a soul. Who takes care of that? Who takes care of your soul? God the Father places an extraordinarily high value on your soul. What value do **you** place on it? Who are your allies in the care of your soul? There is One, above all others, towering in His love, His care, Whose ongoing interest is in your well-being. You know Him and He knows you. “[Jesus said] ‘I AM the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because He is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep’” (John 10:11-13).

It should be patently obvious to you, there are a lot of things out in the world that want to shepherd you. There are a lot of entities, forces in our culture that pretend to have your best interest at heart but all they truly want is to get their claws in you. You see, the more that you pay attention to them the more their power grows, the more their income rises, the more influence they might have over others. Politicians, governmental agencies, big business, social media hacks, Planned Parenthood... these entities don't care a lick about your soul. Neither the governor of California nor the Center for Disease Control cares about your soul. Hired hands; they are not wicked, necessarily. They are just more committed to their own well-being than to the well-being of the sheep. When care for the flock is neither too arduous nor too dangerous, the hired hand is willing to work and receive his pay. Ah, but when he sees the wolf coming, when there is danger to his own skin, the hired hand shows peril his backside, heads for the hills and abandons the sheep to their own devices. Can you, Christian, recognize a hired hand when you see one?

God sent His Son in order that this Savior might shepherd you. Death; in order to defend you from the wolf the Shepherd had to die. The wolf is a genuine threat. You are, on your own, ill-equipped to defend yourself against the hound of hell. He is merciless and cunning and he is equipped with lies and temptation and vice and all of his worst methods have your worst interests in mind. How many of Satan's lies have your ears hearkened to? How many of his temptations have led you down some dark path that, once you've descended a bit, you discover how genuinely wretched that first step was? Do you believe that the wolf is still attempting to pick off sheep, to separate sheep from their Shepherd? Is Satan busily at work during this pandemic to weaken Christ's church? Is Satan attempting to downplay the importance of the Divine Service? To see to it that the sheep are left unfed? How discerning are we? This is a mature body of believers. How discerning are we to see the evil one at work in our era to scatter the sheep?

Peter denied the Lord three times. It was a wretched night for St. Peter, that night when our Lord was arrested and tried. Three times Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. After the Lord Christ was raised from the dead, He restored Peter. It was an intimate conversation; you were a part of it. Three times Jesus asked Peter if Peter loved Him. Each time Peter professed his faith, his fidelity, his love: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Each time, Jesus directed Peter's attention to His sheep: Feed my sheep; tend my sheep; feed my sheep (John 21). That is the will of your Good Shepherd, that you be fed. The crucified and risen Savior knows what you need and He is so focused, so determined that you should receive it. Your soul needs to be fed. By His Word, the Gospel of life that conveys His death and His resurrection, that Word is to fill your ears, fill your mind, fill your heart. Your soul needs to be fed. By the richness of this Divine Service, the poetic beauty of our hymns and by the reception of the Shepherd's body and blood; your soul needs to be fed. Only He has the interests of your soul in His nail pierced hand; only He.

The Good Shepherd, the noble Shepherd, the worthy and authentic Shepherd – He places a high value on your soul. To defend you from the wolf, there was only one course of action. To alleviate you of your sin and the penalty that goes along with it, to open heaven and give you a life beyond your own, there was only one course of action. The Shepherd laid down His life. When He came to us, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, it was His intention to die. When He came, it was His intention to bear your sin. Remember, you don't bear your sin – you commit it but you don't bear it, you are not punished by God for it – Jesus was. On the cross, your Good Shepherd suffered not just a physical death, not just physical torment and horrific pain – He **bore** your sin – your pride and your lust and your hate and your greed and your deceit and your radical selfishness. It was so foreign to Him and yet He bore it – the full load of human filth saturated His being and He was punished as the One who bore it. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13).

He had the authority, the love to lay down His life. He does not merely risk His life; He lays it down. Your interests are more important to Him than His own. That is what makes Him your Good Shepherd. You were in mortal danger and He stood between you and the ravenous wolf. Death now is defeated. Satan's head is crushed. Hell itself is vanquished and life comes striding

out of the tomb. He has the authority! Resurrection! Life is the Victor! Jesus shepherds you through the valley of the shadow of death. You will go through the valley of death into the light of eternal life because Christ is risen and death is nothing more than a shadow.

We are Christ's flock. He knows us and we know Him. We listen to His voice (John 10:16). He feeds us – making us to lie down in the green pastures of His Word and leading us beside the still waters of His sacraments. What is the result? We become like Him. In humility, we count others more significant than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). He invites us to His table knowing that we can't repay (Luke 14:12-14). In turn, we befriend others who cannot reciprocate, laying down our lives for those in need (1 John 3:16). What a joy it is to be one of His sheep! What a joy it is to become, more and more, like our Good Shepherd. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name, given under heaven, who takes care of our soul. Blessed be our Good Shepherd. Blessed be the sheep of Christ the King.