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The Fourth Sunday of Easter

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The Risen Savior Shepherds His Sheep

The picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one of the most well-known and dearly loved pictures in the Bible. In a society where shepherding was as common as farming is today, people understood the comparison immediately. Christian art and music help us to see the beauty of Jesus the Shepherd. It is more difficult for us to grasp how dangerous it was to be a shepherd. In order to save his sheep, he faced swollen streams, rocky hills, and predatory animals. Today's Gospel takes us to that scenario: The Risen Savior laid down his life for the sheep.

Sermon

John 10:11-18

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

Introduction – There's a feature on your computer that enables you type in a subject on your search line and then almost instantly see a picture of what you had searched for. You just have to click on the word *images*. So you type *George Washington*, click on *enter*, click on *images* and you get hundreds of pictures of George Washington. Yesterday I typed *St. John's Lutheran Church Mequon Wisconsin* and clicked on *images* and there we were—at least a dozen pictures!

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. We've been here before. This Sunday comes around every year during the Easter season and the Gospels for these Sundays always come from John chapter 10 where Jesus says **I am the Good Shepherd**. So if you typed in Good Shepherd on your search line and then clicked on *images*, what would you expect to see? I think you know. You'd see a handsome young man with flowing brown hair and a smile on his face. He'd be wearing a spotless white robe and holding a shepherd's staff in his hand. He'd be carrying a little lamb in his arms and leading a flock of sheep. When we think of the Good Shepherd or when we say, **The Lord is my shepherd** isn't that the image we have? Of course it is.

OK. This is interesting. In the section of John chapter 10 that we heard today, Jesus says this: **The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep**. And then he says it again and then he says it again—three times: he lays down his life for the sheep. I know what that means and so do you. Jesus gave his life—he died on the cross—to take away our sins. That's Christianity 101. So I typed that phrase into my search engine and clicked on *images* and

found hundreds of photos and pictures and drawings and not even one—not even one—depicted the Good Shepherd being dead. A few showed him wading through swollen creeks or taking a stand against a lion or a bear or climbing a steep hill to grab a lamb, but none of them showed the Good Shepherd laying down his life for the sheep.

When we think about the Good Shepherd we tend to think about green pastures and quiet waters and right paths and a rod and a staff and goodness and mercy. All peaceful and calm, all blessed and good. But Jesus reminds us today that all the peace we have, all the calm, all the blessings, and all the good belongs to us because the Good Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep. In other words,

The Good Shepherd Died Necessarily...Intentionally...Voluntarily

1. So here's the picture Jesus paints. You have these sheep over here eating grass and you have this wolf over here licking his chops and you have a hired hand in the middle. Jesus says, **The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.**

The meaning is pretty obvious. We are the sheep and so are all the people who have ever lived or whoever will live on this planet. The wolf is Satan who wants to destroy the sheep. He tricked Adam and Eve to sin because he knew they would pass that plague on to every one of their descendants. He knew that sin would end their friendship with God and he knew that God's perfect justice would demand a payment and a penalty that they couldn't produce. Satan was convinced he had us just where he wanted us—marching on the road that leads to his house in hell.

What Satan didn't know—or what he didn't understand—was that God's love was as strong and as perfect as his justice. What he didn't know—or what he chose to ignore—was that God intended to crush his head. What he didn't know—or what he didn't anticipate—was that God's one and only Son would take on human form and stand in for the human race. God's Son would make the payment and endure the penalty. Jesus would satisfy God's judgment, he would restore the friendship, he would annihilate Satan, and he would re-open Paradise. Jesus says **I am the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep.** The Good Shepherd died.

The Good Shepherd died **necessarily**; he had to die. There was no other way to satisfy God, no other way to take away sin, no other way to defeat the devil. Pagans and their idols of silver and gold? Didn't work. Pharisees and their insistence on obedience? Couldn't work. Jewish fanatics and their plan to restore Israel's glory? Never worked. They were nothing but hired hands who had no power and no interest to save the sheep. The hired hands are still around us today. The Muslims offer us Allah, the Buddhists offer us nature, popular preachers offer us prosperity, politicians offer us victory and change—they are all hired hands who cannot provide what we need. The peace we crave, the calm we desire, the blessings we enjoy, and the good we want, the forgiveness we need, and the life we have with God comes only because the Good Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep. The Good Shepherd died—**necessarily**.

2. The Good Shepherd died for all the sheep, for all the sheep the wolf attacked. But Jesus also died for this sheep, he died for me. "I am Jesus' little lamb; ever glad at heart I am, for my shepherd gently guides me, knows my need and well provides me, loves me every day the same. Even calls me by my name." Jesus knew me before I was born and he knows me now better than anyone, better than my mom and dad ever did, better than my sons, even better than Brenda. He says, **I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.** Did you catch the comparison he makes? **I know my sheep just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.** Can you imagine that? That Jesus bonds with me in the way he bonds with his Father? He knows when I sin and he knows when I'm scared. He knows when I laugh and he knows when I cry. When he laid down his life for the sheep, he laid down his life for me. The one who created me and formed me says to me, **I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.** He did this on purpose, he did it with a plan. He died for me "that

I might be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.”

He did the same for you and for everyone who follows him. He has a purpose and a plan for you, too. He said, **I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.** This is his strategy: He herds us into his flock, he adopts us into his family, he joins us to his invisible Church, the communion of saints, where he feeds us and grows us and preserves us with his Word and sacraments. And right there he takes us to the cross that frees us from death and he takes us to the empty tomb that guarantees us life. We have never been afterthoughts to Jesus, never been insignificant. Jesus had each of us in mind when he laid down his life. The Good Shepherd died—**intentionally.**

3. We’ve watched the Good Shepherd die; we do it every year during Lent. He wasn’t handsome on the cross. The long hair was drenched in blood, the flowing robe was stripped off by soldiers. No shepherd’s staff in one hand, no little lamb in the other; his arms were spread out and nailed to a piece of wood. No flock behind him; most had forsaken him and fled. We’ve heard his prayer that the cup be removed; we’ve heard his question, **My God, why have you forsaken me?** No death was ever like this. But Jesus never flinched, he never hesitated. **I lay down my life for the sheep,** he said. **No one takes it from me. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.** The Son of God understood his role and he accepted his role. The command came from his Father and he carried his Father’s will. He was to be the substitute and the suffering servant. He was to provide the price and pay the penalty. He set the time and the place and no one could speed it up or slow it down. He fulfilled all the prophecies, one after another. He told Peter to put away his sword; he told Pilate that he would not raise an army. Jesus laid down his life because he wanted to, he was determined to. The Good Shepherd died—**voluntarily.**

Nobody made Jesus die; nobody forced him. He wasn’t a helpless victim. Jesus laid down his life because he loves us. Why do we find strength in green pastures and quiet waters and right paths? Jesus loves us. Why are we unafraid even in the dark valleys of death? Jesus loves us. Why do his rod and staff comfort us? He loves us. Why does he prepare a table for us, anoint our head with oil, and overflow our cup? He loves us. Why will his goodness follow us? Why will we dwell in his house forever? Jesus loves us. “Oh, the height of Jesus’ love, higher than the heavens above, deeper than the depths of sea, lasting through eternity.” The Good Shepherd died necessarily—our only hope. The Good Shepherd died intentionally—our closest friend. The Good Shepherd died voluntarily—he loves us. If you want to know what the Good Shepherd looks like, don’t go to *images* on your computer. Go to the cross where the Good Shepherd died.

The sermon was preached by Pastor James Tiefel.