

Misericordias Domini, the Third Sunday of Easter  
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Rev. David A. Kind  
University Lutheran Chapel  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✠ Jesu juva ✠

### THE SHEPHERD BECOME A SHEEP

Ezekiel 34:11-16; I Peter 2:21-25; John 10:11-16

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen



Sheep require a shepherd. Sheep left on their own don't do very well, you see. They wander off from places of safety seeking greener pastures and before you know it they are under attack from predators. In Palestine sheep were often taken by lions and by wolves. And the shepherd's job was to do his best to protect the sheep under his care from these vicious, hungry, predators.

Of course, just how much protection the shepherd provides depends on the kind of shepherd he is, and on whether or not he really cares about the welfare of the sheep. If the sheep are your own and you depend upon them for your livelihood you are going to care about them a whole lot more than if you have merely been hired to take care of someone else's sheep. The value you put on the sheep will relate directly to how tenacious you are in protecting them when the wolves and lions attack.

Some hirelings, the really honest and faithful ones, will try to defend the flock for a little while. Some will flee as soon as they see a predator coming. But with either sort it is unlikely that they will put their own life at serious risk for a flock that is not their own. Wouldn't it be better to let the wolves take one or two sheep and live another day to lead the rest of the flock in safety? Or even just to abandon the flock altogether and escape unharmed? If the sheep are not your own, then the answer would probably be yes. This is why Jesus says: "a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep."

Jesus, though, is not a hireling. He is the shepherd who owns the flock. And the flock is dear to Him. He says: "I am the Good Shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known of My own." And He does not want any of His sheep to be taken by wolves or lions. Every one of them is precious to Him. He is not willing to sacrifice even a few of them to appease the predators. He would rather die Himself than let His sheep be destroyed.

But His sheep are constantly under attack. And they are under attack by predators much more powerful than your average wolf or lion. These wolves and lions

are vicious and unrelenting in their attacks. And they are not satisfied with taking but one or two sheep. No, they want to devour each and every one of them.

Now most shepherds will fight to protect their sheep. But these enemies are not only relentless, but also not easily defeated when they attack. They may be put to flight one moment, and the next moment they are back and at the sheep's throats. The only way to defeat these wolves is to destroy them completely.

And so Christ does something unheard of. The Shepherd makes Himself as one of the sheep. He becomes not only a sheep, but presents Himself as the weakest and most vulnerable of the flock, as a helpless, docile lamb. And as such, He lures the enemies of the flock to Himself so that they will attack Him instead of the flock. As He said: "I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep."

And it works. The wolves and lions attack Him with all of their might. Satan plots against Him, constantly seeking His fall. Tempting Him, testing Him, battling Him, and when He doesn't fall to these attacks, working tirelessly to get Him killed. Sin clings to Him and lays hold of Him. He Himself does not fall to it, but takes the sins of the sheep, indeed of the whole world, on Himself. And sin thinks it will destroy Him. And finally death grips His flesh and claims Him. All of this happens to Jesus as He goes forth to lay down His life for His sheep, to be crucified to save us from our sins, going forth as a lamb to the slaughter, or as St. Peter says: "Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree..."

But the predators, these ancient enemies of all mankind, find not a docile helpless little lamb, but the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, who disarms death, who casts Satan into the depths of Hell; who is not only called the Good Shepherd, but also the Lion of Judah. He is crucified. He dies. But He is not defeated. He lays down His life for the sheep. But this He who said in the very next verses of John's Gospel: "I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." And He does. He rises up again on the third day! Once and for all He defeats these wolves, destroys these lions, and frees His flock from their power.

And now they can no longer hurt Christ's sheep. Their power has been stripped away. Oh they still threaten, and they still snarl. Now I do not mean to say that now that Christ is risen you will never sin again or that your body will not die one day. You will. And these predators will try to convince you that you are helpless against them. They will try to lure you away from the Good Shepherd. But against Christ they can do nothing. And therefore against His sheep they can do nothing, so long as the sheep remain faithfully at the Good Shepherd's side. The only way they can hurt Christ's sheep is if the sheep give them the power to do so

by abandoning the shepherd and thereby opening themselves up to their attacks again. For without the Shepherd's righteousness and grace you are doomed to fall to them on account of your sins. But in Christ, you, the sheep of His flock, are made conquerors too through Him.

And Christ, the Good Shepherd, who died for you and defeated these wolves, also has promised to care for you as only the Divine Shepherd can. He says through Ezekiel: "I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down... I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick..." And this He has done and continues to do for us! He has gathered us, who were all stray and wandering sheep in our sinfulness; gathered us by Holy Baptism, where we were marked as His own and made a part of His holy flock, the Church, and given the forgiveness He has won through His sacrifice – "by whose stripes you were healed," Peter says. He has made us to lie down and feed in the good pastures of His Holy Word, where we hear His voice, and our souls are fed with the Words of Life. And He has given us the fruits of His death and victory by feeding us with the choicest pasturage of His flesh and blood, joining Himself to us and us to Him.



Now the old enemies will continue to try to gain the victory over you again, it is true. And you will sometimes, daily even, fall in some way to their influence and enticements. Sin, Satan, and death, as I've said continue to snarl at us like lions and wolves, and want to devour us. So what must you do to be safe? Stay by your Shepherd. Follow Him. Listen to His voice. Remain by His side. Yes, return again and again to the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls, to Christ who loves you, the Shepherd who became a lamb to be sacrificed for you, who died and now lives, and who has given you the victory over every wolf and lion that would harm you; to whom be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠

