

Third Sunday of Easter - Misericordias Domini, April 23, 2023

Readings: Ezekiel 34: 11-16; 1 Peter 2: 21-15; John 10: 11-16

The Good Shepherd Cares for His Sheep

Our Lord Jesus is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11–16). He is not like the hireling, who cares nothing for the sheep and only for himself, who flees when he sees the wolf coming. Rather, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who seeks out His scattered sheep to deliver them (Ezek. 34:11–16). He gathers them and feeds them in rich pasture. He binds up the broken and strengthens the sick. He lays down His life for wandering and wayward sheep. On the cross, Christ bore in His body the attacks of the predators of sin and death and the devil for you that you might be saved. He now lives to restore your soul in the still waters of baptism, to lead you in the paths of righteousness by the voice of His Gospel, to prepare the table of His holy supper before you, that you may dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23). *“For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls”* (1 Peter 2:25).

Sermon Transcript:

Grace, mercy, and peace speak to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

God is the good shepherd and He lays down His life for the sheep. What does this tell us about God and what does this tell us about ourselves? One, He is a good shepherd. He knows us. He calls us by name. Now, unfortunately, that also means He knows us. He knows everything about us - the good, the bad, and the ugly and everything in between. And it also says that if He is the shepherd, then we are the sheep. And I'm afraid to tell you, folks, sheep are dumb.

So what does that tell us about ourselves? Yeah, unfortunately it says a lot. There is an image that I have seared into my vision. It came on YouTube, I don't know, several years ago. I don't usually mention videos or anything like this, but this is just so poignant and fitting to the message. It's a video of a sheep that is stuck in a ravine about yea wide. Now it looks like the sheep is about yea wide, but it's all fluff and no consequence, so it fits in a ravine about this wide. And it's upside down and it's back legs are sticking up. And there's a shepherd yanking on the back legs, pulling the sheep out of this crevice. Finally gets the sheep out, the sheep goes one, two, right back in, right back in the crevice about 50 feet down, back legs hanging up, everything like this. And that one, epitomizes sheep. They get themselves into trouble all the time, and they really are dumb. And it tells us a lot about ourselves as well.

I was singing the hymn, the opening hymn 711 "Savior like a shepherd, lead us." And the chorus, or the last part on verse three is "Early, let us turn to you." Why are we singing early, let us turn to You. Why? Because we don't turn to God early in our crisis, in our troubles. What do we do? We try and fret it out, we try and worry it out, we try and suss it out. We get all consumed and obsessed and try and work and figure out how things are going to work. And then when everything else fails, then "Oh God, please help me."

Really? Why do we not go to God first? Because what does all of our fretting and worrying do? Honestly, we worry about almost everything in our lives. Anything that goes wrong, any problems in this life, both personal, political and geo-economic, we worry and we fret. You turn on the news and you're just getting anxious. But what does that actually do to help in any way, shape, or form? It doesn't help your health in any way. In fact, it

probably makes it worse. You know, what man by worrying can add a day or an hour to his life. In fact, worrying probably shortens your life by an hour or a day or more.

So what good do we think it's going to do? Why do we as sheep continue to dig deeper holes for ourselves to get into instead of turning to God and trusting in His steadfast love, His misericordias, the mercy and love and grace of God given to us freely? Because while we are yet speaking, He answers. And before we speak, He gives us what we need.

We spend all this time trying to figure things out, and then we go to God in prayer as if we did not remember the last time we were in trouble and we were in heartache and we prayed and God worked it through. Now, it still might have been difficult and hard, but we made it through. And hopefully we discovered how strong and faithful our God was, that He gave us the strength to make it through this crisis. He guided and directed us, brought people into our lives to help us and to nourish us and to lift us up. And yet the next time the crisis happens, we forget, and then eventually we pray to God. But again, why do we pray? Why do we bother praying? One, because eventually we finally recognize that God is the one that gives us strength, that God is the one that will guide and direct us. But prayer is not about you telling God what's going on and Him going, "Oh, I didn't know that was a problem of yours. Let me figure something out."

You think God is surprised of the difficulty and situation of your life? He's not surprised. He knows. He sees all. Prayer is not about informing Him about what you need. Prayer is helping you to understand where your source of comfort and hope is. You think about this: When we envision prayer, ideally the position of prayer physically is kneeling. It's one of the first things we learn, hopefully, is we get out of bed and we kneel beside our bed and we fold their hands and say, "Now I lay me down to sleep." But that position is kneeling at the foot of the bed.

And when we come before here, we have the kneelers here to kneel when we receive the Lord's body and blood. Kneeling is a unique bodily position. We don't do it very often because it signifies a submission, a willingness, a humility. If you are kneeling before someone, you are acknowledging that they are the authority over you. We kneel in prayer because our physical body helps us to mentally understand our position before God.

We, like sheep, have gone astray. We recognize that and we humbly ask for God to nourish and strengthen us. That's why the position of kneeling is so profound, because it is an admission that we are subject to God, but God loves us. The steadfast love of God endures forever. This is part of what we are celebrating this Easter season.

When we talk about Jesus Christ, we look at the nail holes and we think about the nails that held Him to the cross. But the fact of the matter is, if Jesus didn't want to be there, no nail on this earth would've held Him there. Not only was He God Himself and could have gotten off that cross if He chose, His Father could have sent legions upon angels to defend Him, but neither one of those things happened. Why? Because of the steadfast love of our good shepherd. It was His love that kept Him on the cross. His love of you as an individual with all of your faults and failings and sins, and mine, He loves us with steadfast love, steadfast mercy. What does that term steadfast mean? He stands fast. He stands firm. There is no moving Him. There is no moving His desire for us, His love for us. Even though we are sinners, His steadfast love is for us. And we are reminded of that and we need to be reminded of that. We can always turn to Him for comfort, for care, for strength, because His steadfast love endures for all time and is given to you.

Ezekiel talks about what God is going to do as our shepherd, and it is truly amazing this passage, I love it for what it says of God and for what little it says of me. I myself will search for my sheep that are scattered. I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them. I will bring them out. I will feed them. I will feed them in good pastures. I will make them lie down. I myself will be the shepherd. I myself will make them lie down. I will seek the lost. I will bring back the straight. I will bind up the injured. I will strengthen the weak. I will feed them with justice. That's what God promises to do for us. Now, where in all of that Ezekiel passage, is there anything about what the sheep do? There's nothing. Well, okay, the sheep are scattered and were lost. We got that part down, but God does the rest. God saves us. He nourishes us. He strengthens us. He binds up our wounds.

Now, just like the shepherd pulling that sheep out of the ravine, I'm sure this sheep wasn't all that comfortable as the shepherd was pulling on that leg. It probably didn't feel too good to the sheep, but it was good for the sheep. So we can remember this: Even when we go through trials and tribulations, even when we suffer in this world, as Peter says, "For to this, you have been called because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example."

In this world, you will have sorrow. But take heart, I have overcome this world. God will always care for us. It may not always feel the best. It may not always be easy. It probably is not going to be easy, but it always will be for our good because God promises us that He works all things together for the good of those who love Him. All things, including our screw-ups and our mess-ups, including the things that are absolutely our fault. God works for good because of His steadfast love of you and me. So hold firm and fast to His love. Humble yourself. Submit to the Father because He is a loving father and He will always be with you to the very end of the age.

So now may His grace, mercy, peace, and steadfast love be and abide with you always, now and forevermore, unto life everlasting. Amen.