

April 23, 2023

Misericordias Domini

Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-16; John 10:11-16

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Scriptures contain many places where the Lord God is spoken of as a shepherd, several of which we heard this morning. “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,” the Lord declares through Ezekiel. “I am the Good Shepherd,” says Jesus. David gives us those wonderful words to confess: “The LORD is my shepherd.”

It’s a familiar image, and a comforting one, having the Lord as our shepherd. But though it is familiar, it never hurts to remind ourselves what the Lord does as our shepherd, and why. The better we understand this, the greater comfort we have.

So what does God tell us in His Word that He does as our Shepherd? First, a shepherd gathers his flock. As He said through His prophet Ezekiel, “As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.”

As shepherd, the Lord gathers. Now before we ask how He does that, we should consider why He needs to do that. Why does a shepherd need to gather? Because the sheep stray.

This is perhaps one way you could summarize the story of the entire Bible: sheep stray; the Shepherd gathers.

The first two sheep, Adam and Eve, listen to a voice other than that of their Shepherd, eat the forbidden fruit, and then run off into the Garden to hide. But the Lord seeks them out, asking where they are, calling them to return to Him.

Later on, when Noah’s descendants have spread out across the earth, pretty much no one remembers the God who destroyed the world with a flood and saved their eight ancestors. And so the Shepherd calls a particular sheep, Abram, and tells him that He will continue His promises through Abram’s offspring.

Much later, as those children of Abraham dwell in the land God promises to them – a good land flowing with milk and honey – they wander off again and again, serving the gods of the surrounding peoples and committing the horrible abominations that those people did, things like child sacrifice and all manner of sexual perversions. Yet when the people have given themselves over to the hired hands of the Philistines and Midianites and Egyptians and others, those hands oppress the sheep and feed them to the wolves. And so the Lord raises up judges and kings to deliver His people, prophets to sound forth His voice to His sheep and gather them again to Himself.

God would even come Himself, in the flesh, to call out to His people. Yet that would end with the sheep ganging up with the hired hands to throw the Good Shepherd to the wolves, who crucified Him. But death would not keep the Shepherd from His sheep. He would take up His life again on the third day, returning to His frightened flock to give them His peace.

This is a constant throughout history, that we sinful sheep are constantly wandering from our God. All of us are corrupted by sin, poisoned against our Shepherd from the start. We sang of this in our sermon hymn, confessing that, “Perverse and foolish, oft I strayed.” Our reason, our feelings, our judgment, all of it has been corrupted by sin. Hence why we wander so much.

We hear the calls of others, calls of hired hands, calls of those to whom we do not belong, and we wander off toward them. We think that maybe they will have greener pastures than where our Shepherd has brought us. Maybe they will lead us on paths that are broader and easier than the narrow path our shepherd leads us along. Maybe they won’t direct us with rod and staff, but instead only give us pleasure and not punishment. That great wolf, the devil, the father of lies, is constantly giving lies to his hired hands to lead away God’s sheep to destruction.

Yet the Lord doesn’t just sit back and watch this happen and figure, “Eh, I’ve still got plenty of sheep left, not worth chasing that one down.” No, He loves the sheep, for they belong to Him. It pains Him when even one sheep strays from His fold.

And so He calls out after His sheep. He sends prophets and apostles and pastors and missionaries, and even seemingly ordinary Christians to speak His Word. This Word is no ordinary word, for it contains His very power, the power of God unto salvation, as St. Paul writes in Romans.

Speaking through these various mouths, God sends forth His Word, by which He not only calls but even transforms. His Spirit works through His Word to change the hearts of His sheep, to restore what has been hardened, to bring light into where darkness has resided.

Through His call, the Lord brings us His sheep to repent of all the places where we have wandered and to come back to His fold, back with the sheep of His flock. He is the Good Shepherd, and the Good Shepherd gathers His flock.

As the Good Shepherd, our Lord not only gathers His sheep, He also tends them, cares for them. Again, through the prophet Ezekiel He says, “I will feed them with good pasture... and I will bind up the injured and I will strengthen the weak.” He does this, because as sheep we are incapable for tending ourselves.

Now, we certainly love to think otherwise. We love to look around at what we have and what we’ve done and think that its all ours – earned, bought, deserved. Yet this is just as ridiculous as a sheep thinking – if it even could – that it was responsible for making the pasture green or the waters still. As God says in His Word, “What do you have that you did not receive?”

Everything we have is from the gracious hand of God. Our possessions, our wealth, our jobs, our homes, our clothing, our talents, our friends, our families – everything and everyone is from God. Yes, He uses various ways and means to give them to us, but at the end of the day it’s all from Him. Even our very lives, that we are breathing and our hearts are beating, it’s because He knit us together in our mother’s wombs and has sustained us every single moment since then.

And of course it isn’t only earthly things that He gives to us. Our Good Shepherd cares for us in body and in soul, giving us spiritual, immaterial blessings as well.

Whatever knowledge and wisdom we have, we have because He has given it to us, since He is the source of both. Whatever truth we possess, it comes from Him, for He is truth. As He told Pontius Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth.” Whatever goodness, whatever virtue we possess, we have only as a gift from Him, His Law written on our hearts, His Spirit working in our hearts to sanctify us.

And especially, the life we have, the spiritual life, the eternal life – this is from Him and only from Him. We live because He, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down His life for the sheep. The wolves would have torn us to pieces; Satan would have drug us down to hell, had not our Lord laid down His life for us. By taking on all our sins, all our guilt, and washing them all away in His blood, He has disarmed the devil, He has pulled the teeth and claws from the wolf.

We will live, not because we have done anything to earn it or deserve it, but because our Good Shepherd has died for us. Our Good Shepherd tends His flock, both now and into eternity.

So our Lord gathers His flock, He tends His flock, and finally, He leads His flock. He must lead us, because we cannot find our way without Him.

As we said before, we sheep will wander off if left to ourselves. Even in a group, we cannot find our way to the good land, the Promised Land to which our Lord is leading us. We would be content – we think – with the here and now.

So much of human thought, both in our imaginations, myths, and legends, but also in our serious thought, is spent trying to figure out how to live forever. You have legends like the fountain of youth. You have scientific efforts to upload a human mind into computers.

Both seek to make a person live forever, all so we can stay in this world and continue experiencing what it has to offer. When our sinful selves strive for things, it’s always the things of this world, stuff that perishes, that fades away, that never satisfies.

But our Shepherd wants so much more for us. He didn’t lay down His life so that we could be stuck in this world, this life, forever. No, He has something so much greater, so much better for us. He speaks of it figuratively in Ezekiel, saying, “I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country.”

Remember, Ezekiel is speaking to the people as they are in captivity in Babylon. As they are trapped there in a foreign land, downcast, seemingly without hope, their Shepherd speaks through His prophet and reminds them of their own land, the land of their fathers, the land that is their home.

And He doesn’t do this just to get them to reminisce about the past. He does this to give them hope for the future. He gives them His promise, His Word, that as He brought their fathers out of Egypt to that land, He will bring them out of Babylon, back to that Promised Land as well.

Our shepherd does the same for us. In His Word, He reminds us that this is not our home. This is not the greenest pasture, the stillest water. In this world, we are sojourners, exiles, strangers in a strange land.

Our Lord is leading us to bring us into His Kingdom, His Paradise, His heavenly Mount Zion. He is leading us to the Land He promised to our fathers, to which He has brought our fathers, who now rest with Him in peace. Our Lord is leading us to our true home.

He went ahead, preparing the way for us, opening the gates of heaven by His cross, and showing that they are indeed open by His resurrection. And having opened them, He comes back and brings us along the way, speaking to us in His Word, being with us in His Sacrament.

We must remember, then, that He is leading, and we must follow. We cannot stop walking on the path, or take off in a different direction, and expect to make it. If we do this, He will come to us, and He will try to get us moving again in His footsteps.

As the Good Shepherd, He will use His rod – punishment – and His staff – instruction – to guide us. He will comfort and strengthen and encourage and teach. But He will not force us. The Good Shepherd desires His sheep to follow Him because they know Him and love Him, not to follow out of resentful compulsion. He lays down His life for us, but if we reject that greatest of gifts, then we must face the wolves by ourselves.

Flee, then, from the voices that are not the Good Shepherd's. Don't be distracted by the junk of this life and take your eyes away from the treasures of eternity. Remember all that your Shepherd has done for you, the love He has shown to you and to all His saints.

Hear what the Scriptures say on this, from the book of Hebrews: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

Don't be pulled away by patches of weeds when the green pastures of heaven await. Don't drink from brackish puddles when the still waters, the waters of life, lie ahead. Don't let the grave, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, scare you away, but instead look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who as Hebrews says, "for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

He is the one who leads you, and He is leading you to that very throne of God, the New Jerusalem. There, there will be one flock, one Shepherd. Hear His voice. Follow His footsteps. Give thanks that He, the Good Shepherd, has gathered you into His flock, that He tends you and provides you with all you need, and that He is leading you and all His flock out of this land into the Land He has promised to all who believe in Him. There, you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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