

Misericordia Domini
John 10:11-16; Psalm 23

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Introduction: In Ezekiel God declares that He will be your Shepherd and that He will seek you out and rescue you. (Ez 34:15, 11) In our Gospel reading today, Jesus identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd. He is God who seeks you out and rescues you! He promises to be your Shepherd. What does it mean that Jesus is your Shepherd?

The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. (J 10:11)

First, Jesus gave His life for you. He says the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep! Just as a shepherd protects the sheep from predators like wolves and bears, Jesus protects you from the predators of sin, death, and the devil. Unlike ordinary shepherds who are hired hands and flee before wolves and bears, He took on your sin, faced death, and defeated the devil! He did this to rescue you!

It's even deeper than that. You don't even know you're in need of rescue! You're born naturally a goat. You're born in the image of Adam. (Gn 5:3) You have no fear, love, or trust in God. In Matthew 25, Jesus talks about the final judgment. Sheep are believers and goats are unbelievers. You're born a goat. Jesus must seek you out and make you a believer. You can't be a sheep unless Jesus makes you one!

You're made a sheep through baptism. Jesus says you must be born of water and the Spirit to be a sheep. (Jn 3:5) You are sprinkled with water and given a new heart. (Ez 36:25-26) A new heart that begins to fear, love, and trust in God. You're made a sheep and brought into the sheepfold of the church and shepherded by Jesus Himself! Let's look at Psalm 23 and see how Jesus shepherd's us.

I shall not want. (Ps 23:1)

Jesus says that you “shall not want.” Our modern use of that word obscures what Jesus means. What comes to mind with the word ‘want?’ Usually it’s your selfish desires, isn’t it? I want a new car. I want to see the LA Dodgers at Dodger stadium. I want to remodel my master bathroom. It’s like asking a teenager what he thinks heaven will be like. There’s usually nothing biblical about their answers!

Another way to translate the Hebrew word is that you’ll not be in need. Needs and wants are two different things aren’t they? You need shelter. You don’t need a mansion. You need food. You don’t need cake and candy. You need love. You don’t need a life filled with promiscuity which is the facade of love. You certainly need love, food, and shelter, but I believe Jesus has a deeper need in mind.

God promises to give daily bread to everyone, not just His sheep. Daily bread is the collective name we give to the needs of love, food, and shelter. In the Small Catechism, there is a section on daily prayers. We can ask this blessing before we eat: “The eyes of all look to You, O Lord, and You give them their food at the proper time. You open Your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” (Ps 145:15-16) God feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field. (Mt 6:26, 28) He will certainly feed and clothe you, who are of more value. We pray the blessing before we eat to instruct us that God is the source of every blessing and to receive them with thanksgiving. (SC 4th Petition)

Your daily bread is a temporal need. You have an eternal need. Jesus feeds you eternal things. He gives you His Holy Spirit. He gives you the Word which “makes you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” (2 Tim 3:15) He gives you Holy Absolution for a clean conscience before Him. He gives you His very Body and Blood for the forgiveness of your sins and the strengthening of your faith. Jesus gives you what you need for this temporal life but, even more, He gives you what you need for your eternal life.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. (Ps 23:2)

Jesus makes you “lie down in green pastures” and “leads you beside still waters.” Sheep eat grass and prefer still water. They will drink from a stream if it is quiet enough, but they prefer still water. A shepherd has to search out these places for his sheep so they have what they need to live. You don’t have to search out for this place of green pasture and quiet water. Jesus has established it in His church. He feeds you with His body and blood and waters you with His Word.

With so many churches to choose from, how do you know you’re at one that Jesus established? Our confessions succinctly tell us that “the church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered.” (AC VII) If the pastor does not preach Christ and Him crucified, you’re not at the church that Jesus established. (1 Cor 2:2) If the pastor does not administer the Sacraments as Christ mandated them, you’re not at the church that Jesus established. (1 Cor 4:1) You need these things and you go to the place where they are found, *His church*.

He restores my soul. (Ps 23:3a)

Jesus as Your shepherd doesn’t mean you won’t get beat up and bruised in this lifetime. As a sheep of Christ, you have enemies. The devil, the world, and even you’re old flesh, which you’re stuck with until you join Jesus in glory, conspire to harass and defeat you. The world hates Jesus. The world hates you. (Jn 15:18-19) Take heart, Jesus has overcome the world. (Jn 16:33)

Jesus refreshes your soul with the forgiveness of sins and the mutual consolation of the brotherhood.

Jesus provides the forgiveness of your sins in a multitude of ways. These include baptism, absolution, and the Lord’s Supper. He provides so many ways so that you know *without any doubt* that you *are* His precious sheep. Baptism doesn’t just cover your sin up to baptism, but abides forever.

Remember your baptism daily. You were bought with a price and are precious to your Lord. Absolution is available to you at any time to remind you of the awesome fact that you are His. Receive absolution regularly. You are given Jesus Himself in His supper. Receive His Body and Blood often. There He joins you bodily in your temporal suffering! He is Your Shepherd!

He provides you with Christian brothers and sisters who rejoice with you and mourn with you. (Rm 12:15) You are not alone! You are a flock. You have a pastor who acts as a sheepdog and you have fellow sheep who share your burdens and joys with you! In this age of broken families, the fellowship of believers is even more important. In this age of separation due to COVID-19, we realize that much more how much consolation and joy we receive from each other. Praise God for His mercies!

He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. (Ps 23:3b)

Jesus leads you in paths of righteousness. He makes you righteous with His Gospel. He teaches you righteousness with the full counsel of God, both Law & Gospel.

First the Law condemns you. You're born sinful. You wouldn't know what sin is if it weren't revealed to you in the law. (Rom 7:7) The law is really how God made you to work when He made man in the garden. It's true there's a remnant of the law written upon your heart. You have a basic idea of right and wrong. But you make yourself the judge of this right and wrong. You justify and excuse yourself according to what you feel is right. God's law must come in and break your self-centeredness and reorient your conscience to His Word.

This sometimes doesn't feel good. Jesus sometimes uses his crook and staff on you. Just as medicine is sometimes painful but necessary for your health, so the correction of your Lord is sometimes painful but it is necessary for your eternal health. The harsh light of the law must be shined in the dark places of your life so you know you need a Shepherd. You need a savior.

Jesus uses the Holy Spirit, and your parents, and your pastor, and your Christian brothers and sisters to bring you the law. The church uses the Office of the Keys by excluding fellowship, including the Lord's Supper, to the impenitent, stubborn sinner. But Jesus doesn't use the harsh staff of the law to punish, but so that the sinner would repent and return to the flock.

God uses His Gospel to soothe your wounds, even if they are self-afflicted! God's promises assure and reassure you that you're forgiven. Luther had this misguided view early in his ministry. He believed that if everyone in town were Christian, it would be a perfect town. There wouldn't be any need for the law, because Christians would act like they were Christians. I believe it didn't take long for Luther to realize that it wasn't like that in reality. If you spend any time observing Christians, you realize, they don't always act Christian. Sometimes, they may not even look Christian.

This is the reality of what Luther called *simul justus et peccator*. You are at the same time saint and sinner. 100% saint and 100% sinner. This is why you need both the Law and Gospel applied to you the rest of your life. You need to hear what God wills for your life, how you've not lived as you should, and that forgiveness is available to you.

There are some Christians who believe that you only need to hear the Gospel at the beginning of your conversion. A Christian only needs to hear the law. That kind of teaching is quite depressing. You realize you never measure up. You realize you always fail. I've been under that kind of preaching. It leads either to pride or despair. It can lead to pride if you water down God's law and act as if you keep it perfectly. It can lead to despair when you realize how poorly you stack up against that law.

Thanks be to God for His Gospel. You don't measure up to God's perfect law. He forgives you. Without forgiveness we are like the unjust steward who throttles his fellow servant. (Mt 18:21-35)

With forgiveness, we are like the demon possessed man living in the tombs who wants nothing but to be with Jesus after He freed him! And like that saint did, we tell others what Jesus has done for us.

There's also what we call the third use of the law. You're born not knowing how to love. You must be instructed how to love both God and your neighbor. The first three commandments teach you how to love God and the last seven teach you how to love your neighbor. The small catechism is genius in the fact that each commandment has a positive and negative component. The law instructs what we're not supposed to do, but it also teaches us what is God pleasing!

This becomes challenging because at the same time the law teaches you, it accuses you! That is where the Gospel comes in again to forgive your sin. As you grow to know and practice the Law, you grow in your dependence upon Jesus and His forgiveness *and* you grow in your ability to love your neighbor concretely, that is, in deed and not in word.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil. (Ps 23:5a, b)

Jesus prepares a table before you in the presence of your enemies. That's a fancy way of saying Jesus vindicates you!

First Jesus was vindicated by His Father in heaven. His resurrection is a vindication of the life and work that Jesus did on your behalf. God the Father accepted Jesus' perfect life of righteousness and perfect death for the atonement of sin and raised Him from the dead.

Second, God the Father vindicates you. He covers you with the blood of Jesus so that you are forgiven all your sin. He covers you with the robe of Jesus' righteousness. He makes you a beloved child of God so that you receive the full inheritance that Jesus won for you in His death and resurrection. He will vindicate you in your death and you will join the heavenly feast that never ends.

Conclusion: Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Dear Christian, you are His sheep. He cares for you as the shepherd cares for the sheep and He will never abandon you. May you continue to rest in green pastures and by still waters.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.