

OUR GOOD SHEPHERD

11 **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 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. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.**

14 **“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 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. 17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 18 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.”**

Almost 35 years ago I worked for a time as a shepherd of goats and sheep. The grazing pastures were big but not enormous. The main predators I was concerned about were not wolves but coyotes and some wild dogs-- although the biggest danger turned out to be a tornado, which claimed one of them; by the grace of God and some frantic efforts by me and a dog named Bandit, the rest were saved, along with the horses they belonged to the family, who were not home at the time.

But Jesus isn't talking about that kind of a shepherd in our text. He's talking about spiritual leaders. And the main difference between Jesus and every other spiritual leader is that when the bad times come, a hired man runs away.

But our true Shepherd, our Lord Jesus, did not run away, nor does he run away even now that he is ascended. He continues to work in the world as our prophet, priest, and king. As our prophet he keeps sending out believing preachers, teachers, and missionaries to spread his good news, the gospel, to the world.

And in a similar way, our true Shepherd does his work in the world as Priest, sitting at the right hand of the Father, praying, interceding for our sakes, pleading our case before the Father. John says: **“If anybody commits a sin, we have one who speaks to our Father in our defense-- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”**¹

¹ 1 John 2:1

And again, Jesus our Good Shepherd carries out his office as King by protecting us from all our enemies in order to bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom. Paul says: “**The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.**”² And as Jesus says later on in this same chapter about all of us in his flock: “**No one can snatch them out of my hand, and no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand**” (John 10:28-29).

The tool that our Lord does all of this is not a wooden stick, a weapon, or a sheep dog named Bandit, or anything like that. He uses his holy Word in heaven and on earth to proclaim his will for our sakes.

Now, that will of God is partly his divine Law. Our Good Shepherd uses his law in three ways. The Law is used first to keep the world from flying into chaos. The Law helps to keep order in the world by keeping the wicked actions of all people within bounds. Even unbelievers have, as the Bible says, “**the requirements of the law written in their hearts,**”³ so that their consciences bother them when they sin. This is the law as a curb.

The law also holds up God’s will so that we can compare our sinfulness in its mirror. The law as a mirror condemns me, and drives me to pray, “**Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.**”⁴

The law condemns us, shows us that we have broken God’s will, rebelled against him and tried to wriggle out of it, making all kinds of excuses, excuses that don’t hold up. My sin means my death; my sin means my suffering in eternity in hell. My sin means disaster for me every which way I try to turn. There is no escape from my sin.

Except that Jesus is my Good Shepherd. He has rescued me by becoming the Gospel in person. God demands a holy, sinless life from us. Jesus led that life, as a human being, in person. And because Jesus is truly God, his life counts for all lives—everyone who puts their faith in him has his righteous life overlaid on top of ours. Like those commercials for a new bathroom shower, set in place over the top of the old cruddy one, brand new. Except that Jesus will never perish, spoil, or fade. He is always fresh, brand new, spotless, flawless, and set in place instead of us.

And more than living in our place, Jesus also paid the price of our sinfulness by becoming the very sacrifice required as the penalty of sin. God treated him as if he were a sinner, instead of us, by forsaking him and leaving him to suffer the agony of being separated from

² 2 Timothy 4:18

³ Romans 2:15

⁴ Luke 18:13

God the Father. This was the pain of hell, suffered by our good shepherd, who laid down his life for the sheep.

Now Jesus also says something else in this passage. He says: **“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 means that believers who are not from the flock that the Apostles were taken from, would be grafted into the same flock. So the whole flock is one flock, the holy Christian Church. And therefore, this bringing of sheep from other pens is not something in the future-- for example, in the years just before Judgment Day-- but rather, it is what has been happening ever since Pentecost, when sheep from many pens besides the Jews were spoken to in their own tongues by the Apostles and brought into the one flock under the one shepherd.

So today when we confess, **“I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of Saints,”** we are not expressing a wish about the future, but a belief in the present. The **“Holy Christian Church”** is, if you will, the description of the One Flock of Christ, seen from the Shepherd’s point of view. But the second term, **“the communion of saints,”** is not anything different, but the very same body of believers, and if it helps, these words are what we call it on the inside: We are the community of saints, that is, of forgiven brothers and sisters in the very same Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here the law returns to our minds, because its Third Use is not for anyone outside the church. It is a guide for us to live lives of obedience and service to our Savior. We learn the Ten Commandments and ponder them, meditate on them so that, for example, when we consider **the Sixth Commandment**, which is God’s command that the marriage bed is the only place for the physical union and that we will be faithful to our spouse-- the rest of us will also pray for and support that marriage, encouraging that couple to be faithful, and even praising the marriages in our Church family for their bond, for their demonstration of love and faithfulness, and to encourage each of us to seek a strong Christian marriage and a loving and believing spouse, which is God’s will for us all.

All of us who serve Christ as Under-Shepherds have the task **“to feed the lambs and guard against wolves so that they, the flock of Christ, will flee from strange voices and separate the precious from the sinful.”**⁵ Do not wonder or ever doubt: You are his precious lamb. And he is your Good Shepherd. Amen.

⁵ Luther, quoted in the Formula of Concord, Part II, par. 14