

- Easter 3 -
Misericordias Domini - Mercies of the Lord
(April 25-26, 2009)
John 10:11-16
“The Shepherd Who Dies for the Sheep”

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Our text for this morning is from John chapter 10, Jesus the Good Shepherd.

I suppose that one of the interesting things about this text is the word good. At first glance, this certainly is a common word. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He is the one who cares for His sheep, even to the point of giving His own life. But if Jesus is the Good Shepherd, that means that there must be bad shepherds out there, who seek not to feed and care for the sheep, but to fleece them and turn them into mutton.

Our Lord speaks about this in the Old Testament reading from Ezekiel chapter 34. In our Old Testament reading the Lord commands Ezekiel to prophecy against the false shepherds in Israel. These shepherds were not interested in feeding and caring and protecting the sheep. Rather, they wanted to eat and feed themselves. They were interested in their own selfish gain, and in feeding their own bellies.

Of course, the great bad shepherd is none other than Satan himself. Satan would like nothing more than to lead you away from quiet waters and give you the poison of false doctrine instead of the green grass of God’s Word. The so-called shepherds of this world would love to see you leave God’s presence and go off foraging on your own in the world. For without the protecting care of the Good Shepherd, you are a lamb for the slaughter.

This is why it is so dangerous for us to abandon hearing God’s Word and receiving His body and blood here in His Church. There is always one part of us that honestly believes that we don’t need God. Jesus’ death and resurrection is all fine and good, but when it comes to my salvation, well, that’s my own problem. I’ll work out my own faith and life, thank you very much. But this view completely misses point of our text, and really the whole point of the resurrection.

Let me explain. Our Lord promises in Ezekiel that He Himself will feed His flock and care for them. He will not delegate His responsibility to another. God Himself will feed and take care of you. So where does God feed you? He feeds you here, at His altar, with His very body and blood. This isn't simply a rite we do because we've always done it. The Lord's Supper is the very heartbeat of the Christian faith. All of God's work on the cross and in the empty tomb goes into your mouth and soul in Holy Communion. This isn't like an option on a car, where you can get the electronic windows if you want them. Jesus is what shapes and defines your faith, for He is the one that gave you faith. And the way Jesus shapes your faith is by coming to you in his Word and in His Sacrament. Without Him, you are a lost sheep, hopeless and alone. But with Jesus, you are a part of God's flock, and He Himself takes care of you.

Hear again the deep connection between the Father and Jesus and you. Jesus said in our Gospel lesson: **I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.** What our Lord is saying is that the connection between you and Jesus is as close as the connection between Jesus and the Father. As Jesus said elsewhere in John, **I and the Father are one.**

We live in a day and an age when it is so easy to feel alone or to be alone. I remember a thinker once saying that television has made it possible for a million people to laugh at the same joke at the same time and still feel lonely. But this is not only true of television. Our lives are so compartmentalized and categorized that we can easily be disconnected from our family, from friends, from church, and it seems even from God Himself. This loneliness in some ways is an extension of the separation and loss that we all experience because of sin. Sin drives a wedge between you and God, and between you and others. It creates gaps and holes of loneliness that we all feel at time.

This is where Jesus' words in our text bring such comfort to the lonely and downtrodden. **I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.** Jesus is not simply the God who died and rose again from the dead three days later. He is the God who has come into your midst, who binds up your wounds, and who leads you beside the quiet waters of Holy Baptism. Jesus is the good shepherd. He is the one who can restore your soul. He is the bridge that reconnects you to God Himself. He is the link between you and all eternity. He is the door to the heavenly mansions, and the one who will walk with you through the valley of the shadow of death. **By His stripes you are healed.**

So where does this put you this morning, as we reflect on the tender mercies of God? It puts you in His care. It means you are not alone. Indeed, it means that when you eat His body and drink His blood here today in the Sacrament of the Altar, that you are connected to God in a way that is more profound and deeper than any kind of emotional high or feeling could ever give you. God's tender mercy toward you means He cares for you so much that He sent His Son to die. It means that this same risen Son is now in your heart and soul through Holy Baptism, and that when you hear His Word you are connected to eternity itself. Now that may sound kind of pie-in-the-sky or unrealistic. I suppose it is to the world. To the world there is nothing happening here. But to you, God Himself is giving you everything.

Hear again part of the words from our Introit:

**Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him,*
on those who hope in His mercy.**

**To deliver their soul from death,*
and to keep them alive in famine.**

Our soul waits for the Lord;*

He is our help and our shield. (Psalm 33:1, 18-20)

Notice that it says **our soul**. It doesn't say **my soul**. It says **our soul**. We are God's flock, God's church. We are in this together. By participating in His life, we have life in each other. You are not alone.

We in the Christian Church hope in the mercy of God. God will see you through whatever troubles may come upon you. Now that doesn't mean he'll wave a magic wand and make everything better. Rather, it means that God will give you the most important thing of all: He will give you Himself. As Saint Peter wrote in our Epistle: **For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.**

God calls you and gathers you together into His holy flock. You are not alone. You are now a part of God's family. So rejoice in His Easter mercy! For this is what Christ won for you at the cross and in the empty tomb. **The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.** And that goodness comes to you now in His risen Son, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

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