

#### 5.4.2025 Easter 2 (St. John 10:11-16)

Throughout the Bible people are often compared to sheep. In the Old Testament, God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel, and said, *“Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock... so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day”* (Ezekiel 34:11-12). Again, in the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah declared the truth that *“All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all”* (Isaiah 53:6). In the 23rd Psalm, David wrote, *“The Lord is My Shepherd”* (23:1), and in the familiar words of Psalm 100, we find great comfort in the truth that *“We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture”* (100:3).

This pattern of likening people to sheep continues in the New Testament, with St. Matthew telling us that when Jesus saw the crowds, *“He was moved with compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”* (Matthew 9:36). The writer to the Hebrews tells us that the Lord Jesus is *“that great Shepherd of the sheep”* (13:20). In another passage, Jesus said to His disciples, *“This very night you will all fall away on account of Me. For it is written: I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered”* (Matthew 26:31), and in the Gospel text we read today, Jesus said, *“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep”* (John 10:11).

Throughout the Bible people are often compared to sheep, and in our Gospel lesson this morning, God in the Person of Jesus Christ presents us with the truth that people, like sheep, not only need a shepherd, they need the Good Shepherd, because there is a life and death difference between a shepherd and the Good Shepherd. As a way to begin to illustrate that fact, I’d ask you to consider the true story of an incident that happened just outside a small Turkish village on July 8, 2005. On that day, 450 sheep died when their shepherds left the flock alone to graze while they had breakfast. These were literally sheep without a shepherd, and when one of them jumped over the edge of a cliff, the entire herd of 1,500 followed. The only thing that prevented them all from dying that day was that by the time 450 sheep had fallen to their death, the pile of dead sheep had grown large enough to

cushion the fall of the others, saving the rest of the flock.

This tragic story is often cited as a real, historical example of the danger of a herd mentality, the kind of thinking that leads a person to blindly follow the crowd without counting the cost, but consider the shepherds who were given the task of caring for these sheep, and you recognize how well this story illustrates the truth our Lord presented in the Gospel lesson about the difference between a hired hand and the Good Shepherd. Jesus said that *“the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep,”* but *“he who is a hired hand and not a shepherd... sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep”* (John 10:11-13).

Men were hired to shepherd the flock that wandered off that cliff, and therefore it's easy to picture them leaving the sheep alone to graze while they had breakfast. As hired hands, they cared, first and foremost, not for the sheep, but for themselves. Their endeavor wasn't one of the heart, it was a paid service. It wasn't a relationship, it was a transaction, and Jesus points out the same distinction when He tells us that the hired hand leaves the sheep *“because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep,”* but in sharp contrast, it is the Good Shepherd who speaks of the joy of entering into intimacy and relationship with His own, declaring the comforting truth that *“I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”*

By these words our Savior Christ, our Lord and our God, expresses not only the sincerity, but the depth of His infinite, unconditional love. So intimate and personal is the relationship between the Good Shepherd and His sheep that it's compared to the love that unites the Father and the Son. As the Father knows and loves the Son, so the Son knows and loves us (John 15:9), and this love that Christ has for the people of God is expressed not only in word and speech, not only in His bold declaration, *“I lay down my life for the sheep,”* but in action and truth, in the completion of that redemptive work for our eternal Salvation on the Cross at Calvary.

For the sheep placed in their care, there is indeed a life and death difference between a hired hand and the Good Shepherd. This difference may not be

readily seen in day to day life, but it will certainly be revealed in a time of crisis. Outside that small Turkish village it seemed as if all was well when those hired hands left the sheep alone and sat down to eat breakfast, but sheep without a shepherd, to use the words of Scripture, are *harassed and helpless*. Sheep without a shepherd are lost and without hope, and this is exactly where we once were, when we were apart from the Good Shepherd.

As St. Peter wrote in the Epistle we read today, “*For ye were as sheep going astray...*” Like sheep without a shepherd, we’d strayed from the *green pastures, still waters*, and the *paths of righteousness* described in the 23rd Psalm, and we were wandering blindly toward a cliff where certain death awaited on the rocky ground below. Like lost sheep we were exposed to every kind of misery and danger, but thanks be to God, St. Peter is describing what we once were. We “*were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls*” (1 Peter 2:25). We are returned not to a hired hand who leaves us when he *sees the wolf coming*, but to the Good Shepherd, our Savior Christ, who *lays down His life for the sheep*.

Throughout the Bible people are often compared to sheep, but not to just any sheep. Instead, more specifically, the people of God are identified as *the sheep of His pasture*. We aren’t in the care of some hired hand. We are *the sheep of His pasture*. It is the Good Shepherd, the God of Heaven and Earth, who knows us and loves us, who guards us, keeps us, feeds us, leads us, and provides for our every need. Therefore, when it comes down to the life and death difference between a hired hand and the Good Shepherd, our peace and rest are found in the blessed assurance that the Lord is our Shepherd. Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He is before us, behind us, beside us, and His Spirit lives inside us - to guide us home.