



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

**April 22, 2018**

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**“My Sheep, My Shepherd”**

*(Psalm 23:1a)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1a).*

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...  
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

**Collect:** Almighty God, merciful Father, since You have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know Him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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In the Bible, God is addressed by many different names, but none so dear to us than the one given here: “Shepherd.” Scripture also calls him King, Judge, Rock, Fortress and by many other names as well . . . “Teacher,” “Healer.” They all reveal something about God and his character, his attributes. But none tells us as much about him, and about us, as does the name “Shepherd.”

It was God who gave us this name, this way of thinking about him. But we’re not always content with what God gives us, and so we invent and assign our own names to God. Those belonging to the Moose Lodge call God “the Supreme Governor of the Universe.” Those who belong to the Masonic Lodge call him the “Great Architect of the Universe.” The Elks call him the “Exalted Ruler of the Universe.” Alcoholics Anonymous call him your “Higher Power.” And you’ve heard lots of people call him the “the Big Man Upstairs,” which I detest, and I suspect God isn’t too fond of it either because he didn’t give us that name to use. None of these is biblical; none God-given. And they don’t tell us much about him or us. “The Exalted Ruler” sounds like something North Koreans are supposed to use with their dictator. And if God is only the “Great Architect of the Universe,” that tells me he designs stuff, but it doesn’t tell me whether he cares for me or not, loves me or hates me, is pleased with me or ticked off at me.

However, when the Lord is my Shepherd, then at least I know where I stand before the Lord, and where he stands as well. The word Shepherd says so much more about the Lord, who he is and what he does for us. And it says so much more about us, who *we* are and what *we* need.

Of all the domesticated animals sheep require more attention, more care, more protection. They are not the brightest of animals. They don't swim well. They are not built for speed. They have grinders up here, not incisors. Hooves down there, not claws or talons. Wool all around, which is very convenient for the claws of bobcat or wolf, Sheep are prey, not predators.

I think it's brilliant that God calls us sheep. We like to think ourselves tough and autonomous, fierce some even, but God sees us as weak and vulnerable, needing protection, like sheep. Like it or not, that's the reality. We are not the predators we'd like to think we are, but are prey, and our enemies of sin, death and Satan are fast and strong. They have ways of stalking us and sneaking up on us. Little lambs, you cannot outrun a bobcat or a wolf.

We need a Shepherd. That's easier to appreciate when you're old and sick than when you're young and strong. When you're in full stride in mid-career and your net worth is growing nicely, kids are performing well in high school and college, and health is good, who thinks of himself as a sheep? Who needs a shepherd when you're feeling like a wolf? But as our bodies begin to show the wear and tear, when we're no longer as strong as we used to be, or as steady on our feet, or as sharp cognitively, when it seems to take forever to recover from a common cold, or especially when we're lying flat on our backs in a hospital or nursing home, then thinking of ourselves as lions and bears is absurd and completely out of touch . . . and thinking of ourselves as lambs is at least honest and accurate.

Maybe that's why we love this psalm, because deep down we know, we can feel it in our bones. Those aches and pains, those annoying discomforts, they're little preachers, aren't they? And they have just one message, a message they hammer into us day in and day out. And the message is: "You're a sinner. And the wages of sin is death. And in fact, you're starting to break down already." All those little discomforts preach at us and tell us, "You're not so strong. You're not so tough. You're not so fast. You're not so

clever. You're not invincible. And you're not God."

How good it is then to say, "the Lord is my Shepherd." This psalm does not teach us to say "the Lord is a Shepherd." No, he's the only one. And he's not just for others. He's for you. "The Lord is *my* Shepherd."

The possessive pronoun "my" is an important word. You can think of the United States as "a country." Or you can think of it as "my country." Notice the difference? You can say, "this is a church" and for some that's probably the most accurate way to say it because you've not really claimed it as your own. Or, you can say, "This is my church" which means you own it. Good, bad, or ugly . . . it's yours. You care about it, its mission, its welfare.

The Lord is my Shepherd, which means he's the one we follow, no one else. He's the one who has a claim on us stronger than sin, or death or the devil. He's the one who will guide us through this wilderness and feed us and protect us.

Often we pray for young children who are hospitalized. We ought to keep the parents in mind too, because they are there too, they feel an irrepressible need to be close and protective and of comfort. Doctors and nurses, they come and go. Of course they do. The shift changes. Besides, they have their own kids, and as much as they care, they cannot call that one in the hospital bed, "my child." Only the parents can use that possessive pronoun, and so they stay close.

We often see feel-good stories on local news of a celebrity or some big, muscular NFL player visiting a sick child in the hospital. And that's all very nice. I'm glad they do that. But they come and they go. They have time enough to say a few words of encouragement, give the child a signed football, take a photo. A short visit, a stolen moment. It's sort of like a politician flying over a city that has suffered a catastrophic flood. But the parents . . . they stay. One of them is there all the time, because for the parent, that's not "a child" in the hospital. That's "my" child, for whom they would gladly exchange their lives if they could.

When Jesus looks at us, he says, “My sheep.” When Jesus enters into our lives, it isn’t for a stolen moment or two, an autograph and a selfie. No, when Jesus comes, he comes to stay. Isn’t that the promise of baptism? “Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you. If you want, you can turn your back on me. I will never turn my back on you.” We don’t have a part-time shepherd who checks in on his flock every now and then. We have a shepherd who will not leave, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, a shepherd who will not flee when the wolves come or a band of thieves. Why? Because he uses that possessive pronoun, and he means it. “My sheep.” He doesn’t just throw that pronoun around willy nilly. Because he says “my sheep,” he is willing to die for the sheep if he must.

In John chapter 10, Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd” Jesus said. “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the flock.” That’s what Jesus did for you. On the cross, Jesus died for you, for the forgiveness of your sin. We need that forgiveness more than anything because the Bible teaches that’s how we get to heaven: not by our works, not by our righteousness, not by being good or kind or generous. Not by paying our taxes on time or shoveling our neighbor’s sidewalk. No, it’s by grace. “I give them eternal life” Jesus says.

When the Lord says, “my sheep” or “my people” or “my disciples,” there’s great grace in that little word “my.” It makes all the difference. That is, in spite of all our faults and failures, in spite of our sin and wickedness, in spite of our aimless wandering, he still says “my sheep.” He doesn’t say “those darn sheep” or “those stinkin’ sheep” or “those stupid sheep.” No, in spite of everything: “my sheep.” “I know my sheep . . . I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one can snatch them out of my hand.” No wolf or lion is strong or fast or smart enough to rob this Shepherd of his sheep. Not sin, not the devil, not even death.

One last thing: He invites us to think of him as Shepherd. He invites us to say, “The Lord is my shepherd.” We have enough “supreme governors” out there, don’t you

think? And the world isn't dying for lack of "exalted rulers." Exalted rulers, and their wannabes are around every corner. We have enough of them, don't need any more. What we need is one Good Shepherd. Not just any old shepherd, but the One who would even lay down his life for the sheep. Any Shepherd who would lay down his life for the flock, it must mean he loves them. And that's what this Shepherd has done for you. Jesus died for you. It must mean he loves you. Amen.



