

Jesus, the Compassionate Shepherd

The Homily

Grace Lutheran Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico

22 July AD2018

The 9th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 23

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. 3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

Jesus: The Compassionate Shepherd

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father, and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Once again, it is truly a joy and privilege to worship Christ with you today. As you have already noticed, the Old Testament reading speaks of sheep and their shepherd. Today's Gospel finds Jesus feeding the multitude. A common theme in these two lessons can be summed up in the precious words of Psalm 23 which is the

Introit, or Entrance Psalm, for the day.

I invite you to consider Psalm 23 under the theme, "Jesus: The Compassionate Shepherd", and ask God the Holy Ghost to be with us as we meditate on this theme. Let us first consider the meaning of the word "compassion". It means much more than the dictionary would suggest. Pity, sympathy, empathy, care, tolerance, tenderness and charity are fine ideas. But these emotions miss the mark. The Church preaches the passion of our Lord. The word passion means suffering - the Suffering of our Lord. When the prefix "c-o-m" is put in front of passion} it means to suffer with. Hence, Jesus, the Compassionate means Jesus Who suffers with us.

Straight away we call to mind Good Friday. The Church

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preaches Christ and Him crucified. We do not hear anything about

that in the news reports. But we see the Compassionate Jesus in all of His actions – from His conception in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, to His death on Calvary, and burial in the Tomb. The people of this world have no interest in any of this. What makes Good Friday good? What makes Jesus the Good Shepherd? He is the One Who laid down His very life for the sheep. The cross of Christ reminds us of that great sacrifice. He died on the cross, taking upon Himself the sins of the world. He bore the burden, He faced down the devil and all danger. He paid the terrific price – for our redemption. He suffered with us and for us, thus saved us from sin, death, and eternal damnation in hell.

In stark contrast, all the world’s so called leaders, prophets, rich and powerful people – none of them can by any means redeem even themselves, much less the lost souls of this world who would follow their ideas, doctrines or wretched examples. Although they set forth all kinds of schemes, programs, proposals and strategems, with which they would deceive and inveigle those who trust in them, they are really like hired hands, like those irresponsible shepherds described in Jeremiah. At the first sign of trouble, they run away. Christ never runs away. In fact, Jesus invites us to call upon Him in the day of trouble. (Psalm 50:15).

At this point, may I urge you most strenuously: Are you having any trouble whatsoever? Are you perplexed and annoyed in any way? By all means, call upon Jesus the Compassionate Shepherd! He will not run away from you, or abandon you in your hour of distress. Jesus will hear your cry, and answer your need in the most perfect way. Others, like those shepherds in Jeremiah, will run away. Jesus suffers with us. He loves us when we were in the most desperate of situations. In Romans Chapter 5, Saint Paul says, For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. [verses 6-8]. That alone makes Christ the Compassionate Shepherd. For this reason alone, Jesus is worthy of our thanks and praise forever.

During my recent travel back to New Mexico, I saw two scenes that taught me something about sheep and shepherds. Keep in

mind, I grew up in Detroit, Michigan many years ago, and know

nothing about such animals. In fact, for many years, I wondered how a sheep could eat at a table. But that's another silly story that has an easy explanation - as New Mexicans, we know what a "mesa" is. Back to the scenes I saw on my recent journey: One morning I left Eureka, Utah and was struggling to climb the Pinto Summit. As I slowly ascended the pass, my eyes did a double-take to the right side of the road way. There on the hillside was a very large flock of the most beautiful sheep imaginable. Then, my eyes did a triple-take. Further up the hillside, not far, was the shepherd! He wore something like a poncho of many colours - red, brown, grey. I was close enough (and moving slow enough - 18 miles per hour - my truck pulls the trailer very slowly!). Then I saw what that dear shepherd was doing, and what he had in his hand. He had a long stick with a hook at the top. The staff in hand, the shepherd was nudging the stragglers down the hillside to rejoin the rest of the flock. He was so energetic, and the sheep were so secure because their shepherd, with the staff in hand, was guiding them all. Instantly, I began to say Psalm 23.

I few days later, now somewhere in Arizona. I saw another scene, this time the situation was disturbing. This time, scrounging for food along the side of the road were some poor sheep. They did not look well cared for. No shepherd was in view. The sheep were in danger of being hit by the traffic on the roadway. All the noise of passing cars and trucks undoubtedly disturbed them. Who knows what they might have eaten among stuff that could be found on the shoulder of the road. Again, I was urged to say Psalm 23 - only this

time, I thanked the Lord Jesus anew that He is the Compassionate Shepherd.

Our Lord Jesus Christ knows us, He care for us, and He goes with us. Psalm 23 has three verbs - action words that are too often overlooked. "He leads me beside still waters" "He leads me in paths of righteousness .." and "Even though I walk through the valley ...". He leads, He leads, I walk. Action words that describe movement, a journey. The rod and staff comfort. The rod or club, as it were, in the hand of a skilled shepherd was a weapon to beat off enemy animals that might harm the sheep. As I saw on Pinto Pass, the staff was a tool to guide a wandering sheep to stay in the safety of the flock on their journey to green pastures and drinkable water.

Now think of Jesus our Compassionate Shepherd. Not only does He know us, care for us, and go with us on our journey, He brings sornethlngs that bring us comfort. Think of the means of grace. The Word and Sacraments. As we are confronted by the accusations of the devil and his minions, let us remember the words of "A Mighty Fortress"

Though devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us.

We tremble not, we fear no ill.

They shall not overpower us.
This world's prince may still
Scowl fierce as he will

He can harm us none,
He's judged; the deed is done;

One little word can fell him.

The Word of God is both a weapon of defence and of offence, powerful and comforting. Baptism and the Holy Supper also give us comfort in our journey. Have you ever heard a message maybe on radio, or TV, internet or elsewhere and had a strange feeling afterward? Perhaps all the words were right, but the words seem to be used to convey the wrong message? Do you know why you had that strange feeling? You were not listening to the Compassionate Shepherd or one of His true assistants. You were listening to a hired hand, a false prophet, an irresponsible shepherd, such as Jeremiah described. These leaders' only interest is their own selfish welfare. Because you are a follower of Christ, born anew by water and the Word of Baptism, forgiven, trusting only in Him Who died for you, none of the words of these liars appeal to you. All their talk about fasting, prayer, tithing, good works, sacrifice and how great they are, sound hollow, make you feel uneasy and uncomfortable, and rightly so. These people are not the representatives of Christ. They are ambassadors of the devil, who as Jesus said in John 10:10 is come to steal, kill and destroy.

The voice of Jesus, the Compassionate Shepherd brings peace and comfort on our journey. Another word about journey. As we look at the commercials, one might think that travel is trouble free. Just buy that gorgeous fifth-wheel toyhauler, or that impressive motorcoach and you are on your way to carefree journeys. Not so fast! Journey is not trouble free. Life is not trouble free. Struggle,

set-backs, and hardships are part of journey, no matter what mode of travel we select. Sin, Satan, and our own weakness make the journey of life something fraught with danger. Jesus Himself uses "journey language" in John 10:27 when He says, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."

Today, we heard the beautiful Gospel that Jesus fed the multitude - including 5,000 men. We hear that Jesus had compassion on the multitude. There is that word again - compassion. Jesus was the compassionate shepherd to the multitude then, and He is the compassionate shepherd to you and me today. He comes to us in His precious Body and Blood in the

Sacrament of the Altar. Like that multitude that was hungry and lacked food, Jesus does not send us away to find sustenance elsewhere. He feeds us with the eternal Manna, the Heavenly food that gives us forgiveness of sins and life everlasting which sustains us on our journey.

Jesus knows our weaknesses, our insecurities, our struggles, our hurts, our pains, our fears, our innermost thoughts and desires. Jesus strenuously invites us to come to Him in prayer. You and I know well the old hymn of the Christian community that speaks of this.

Have we trials and temptations?

Is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged –
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Can we find a friend so faithful

Who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our ev'ry weakness
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

In the sitting room of my trailer, I have a picture. In AD1979 when I was a vicar at the Church of the Good Shepherd, in Laurelton, Queens, New York, I found a bunch of pictures someone had thrown into the attic of the church. They were pictures of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, leading His flock through a precarious, stony path. On His shoulders, He carried a little lamb who, apparently, needed his shepherd's special attention. I dusted off one of those pictures, and today, it is in my sitting room where I can gaze upon it daily. I often see myself in that picture as that lamb whom Christ is carrying across perilous territory.

I am also reminded of my sainted grandmother, of whom I often speak. On her deathbed, she uttered these words as Angels carried her to Heaven: "The Lord is my Shepherd", she said, as she breathed her last. Such confidence is ours, because Christ not only died for you and me; Jesus rose and now rules over all things. Jesus' majestic lordship is not to the exclusion of His intimate care about the details of our life journey. He orders and directs our days. Even that which appears to be accidental, or troublesome, or even tragic finds the rod and staff of the Lord to comfort us. In difficult times, think of that picture I described of Jesus carrying you over those precarious rocks. Jesus loves you and cares for you and me most particularly when we sorrow and are in distress.

Jesus is the Compassionate Shepherd, indeed. He will

certainly continue to love you and befriend you. May the Holy Ghost empower you to continue to trust in the Lord Jesus. Surely, goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life, and you will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

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