

The Rev. Tom Schaefer is in the process of being formally placed on the roster of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (he was ordained by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod). Part of that process involves submitting a recently-preached sermon. We are pleased to provide him with a venue for preaching that sermon.

April 13, 2008
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church
Rev. Tom Schaefer

“Shepherding the Sheep”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

There is no psalm – perhaps no section of Scripture – that is as familiar to people as Psalm 23. I daresay most of us can recite it – or at least most of it. In my earlier days as a pastor, I spoke the psalm’s comforting words to family and friends at a funeral.

When someone is near death, Psalm 23 is often the lifeline that tethers them to an everlasting hope.

A certain pastor recalled a visit to a hospital where a member was hooked up to life support. The nurse met him at the door to tell him there was no hope; the man could not speak and likely would not recover. Holding the man’s limp hand in his, the pastor began to recite the 23rd psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” There was no reaction. As he continued praying the psalm, he noticed that the man moved slightly. Midway through the psalm, the man’s lips began to move. When the pastor reached the end of the psalm, “and I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever,” the man was softly speaking the words himself. Soon after, he lapsed into a coma and eventually died.

Psalm 23 touched the deepest chord of his spirit – the very foundation of his soul.

We are in the Easter season when the fullness of the Resurrection story is proclaimed and celebrated. Each week, we hear and experience the multi-faceted beauty of the gospel:

- *The women who discover the empty tomb and encounter the risen Christ
- *Jesus' appearance to the disciples and to doubting Thomas
- *The two traveling the road to Emmaus who have their faith restored in the breaking of bread with the resurrected Jesus.

This week, the resurrection story is expanded to reveal even more about our Lord, namely, what his life means to those He calls to be his disciples. You and me. "I am the gate for the sheep," he tells those with ears to hear in the Gospel of St. John. "Whoever enters through me will be saved. . . He will go in and out and find pasture. . . I am the good shepherd."

You can hear it. Those in the first century could hear it: The resonance with Psalm 23 was striking – and was revealing. Let's understand just a bit about shepherding and sheep that Psalm 23 refers to.

Several types of sheepfold were used in Palestine. Animals and thieves were particular dangers to a flock. So villagers would build a common sheep pen to protect their herds at night. The walls could be as high as 10 or 12 feet. Toward evening, the shepherds would lead their herds to the pen where a watchman or gatekeeper would stand guard throughout the night. No one – and nothing – entered that pen without the watchman's permission. His job, with the use of his staff, was to corral the sheep and to count them. He would use it to fend off wild animals that would kill the sheep and thieves who might try to scale the wall to steal the sheep.

In the morning, each shepherd would call out his sheep to follow him from the pen for the day's grazing. And each sheep usually had a name: "Blackfoot," "Long ears." And the sheep recognized their names. (If you have a dog or cat, you know what I'm talking about; though I'm not so sure about the cats!)

That's the familiar imagery that Jesus' listeners understood. Once out in pasture, however, sheep can begin to wander. They can get lost. They can get entangled in brier and brush. Alone and unguarded, they can be attacked by predators. When the psalm refers to the "valley of the shadow of death," the actual word in Hebrew is "gully" or "crevice." It doesn't take much for a sheep to fall into a gully and find itself trapped and vulnerable.

I had a roommate in college who worked during the summer months on a farm that had sheep. He told me he was amazed at how often he'd go out to

the grazing areas to check on the sheep and find one or two lying in small gully unable to stand up and get out. As he told me, “Sheep are really dumb.” Now, I can’t speak as someone knowledgeable of animal husbandry, but clearly the psalm makes the point that dangers are all around for sheep – and apart from the shepherd, they can succumb to those dangers.

“All we like sheep have gone astray” goes the stirring words of Handel’s great 18th-century oratorio “Messiah,” echoing Isaiah 53. “All we like sheep have gone astray.”

What gully are you trapped in? What’s keeping you from getting out? Where have you wandered to? How have you gone astray? It’s when you really listen to the Word – to a psalm like the 23rd – that the Spirit of God can touch that deep chord in your life – the foundation of your soul – and begin to awaken you to the shepherd’s presence. Because we do wander.

When we looked at the 7 deadly sins during the Lenten Sunday morning class, we recognized how easy it is to separate ourselves from God. The gully we’re in is a wide gulf that keeps us from communion with our Lord – from the sin of self-centered pride to spirit-destroying lust, envy and greed. And it is so easy to wander off. In Handel’s “Messiah,” the words “All we like sheep have gone astray” are followed by the words “We have turned every man (and woman) to his own way.”

When the choir sings, “we have turned,” there’s almost a carefree, light-hearted tone to the words, as if turning away from God begins a wandering with consequences that we’re blissfully unaware of. Yet, before long, we can be those sheep lying in the gully, bleating for help, vulnerable to attack, or facing a slow death. The late Rollo May, a renowned psychologist and author of “Love and Will,” wrote: “Humans are the strangest of all of God’s creatures, because they run fastest when they have lost their way.”

And then, the shepherd comes. The 23rd psalm is rich in imagery depicting his love, his care and his mercy. And Jesus knew when he spoke about being the sheepgate and good shepherd to those around him that they would hear echoes of Psalm 23. He was declaring himself to be to Israel (God’s sheep) Israel’s shepherd. And he is declaring to the new Israel (God’s church) to be her shepherd – our shepherd. We are, as Martin Luther called the church, “the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd.”

So how does the shepherd care for us – for you and me?
When we're battered and bruised, he leads us to green pastures and still waters.
When we're weary, despairing and full of doubt, he restores our soul.
When we're hemmed in on all sides by powers and forces that would overwhelm us, he sets the table by offering his body and blood to defeat those who would climb the walls and destroy us.
And when we – or those whom we love – are in the shadow of death, he goes with us through death to resurrection.

Consider this amazing truth: In order for our Lord to become the Good Shepherd, he first had to become a sheep: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

“Surely goodness and mercy will follow.” The Hebrew word for “follow” is more accurately translated “pursue.” Think about it. The goodness and mercy of God don't come as an afterthought, as an expected reward. Goodness and mercy are not playful puppies tagging along behind. No, goodness and mercy pursue us, chase us down when we have gone astray or are despairing, in order to lead us back.

Rabbi Harold Kushner calls the 23rd psalm the answer to the question: “How do you live in a dangerous, unpredictable, frightening world?” Rabbi Kushner wrote “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” after his son, who was born with an incurable illness, died at age 14. He said of that experience:

“I asked myself, how did my wife and I get through that? You would think that would shatter the faith of the average person. Where did we find the strength and the ability to raise him, to comfort him when he was sick and scared, and ultimately to lose him? And the only answer is, when we used up all of our own strength and love and faith, there really is a God, and he replenishes your love and your strength and your faith.”

We know that God to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, who gave his life for us. We now belong to the shepherd who sustains us with Word and Sacrament and restores us to communion with our Heavenly Father no matter how far away we have wandered, no matter how desperate our condition.

And our response? It is the psalmist's confident exclamation: "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever."

Alleluia! Christ is risen!