

OUR REDEEMER LUTHERAN CHURCH
4th S. of Easter—Good Shepherd Sunday
Psalm 23 “A Shepherd for Your Pains”

Iowa City, Iowa
April 17, 2016

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Imagine yourself as a sheep for a moment. It's the end of the day. You stepped on a rock and bruised your foot and twisted your leg. You scratched yourself on some bushes. The other sheep always seem to get the better of the grazing, and they can get very pushy. You feel left out a lot of the time.

That's when you really appreciate a good shepherd, because life can really be a pain for a sheep. You need tender, loving care at the end of a hard day, and you know your shepherd will take good care of you.

Now something you can really relate to—you are yourself now, no imagining. Your shoulder is aching again, the ulcer is acting up, sinuses are getting stuffed up with the blooming of spring, the headaches seldom go away, the neighbors are as bothersome as ever, can't keep up with the bills, no one helps with the house work, no one seems to appreciate what you do at home or at work or even at church, there are some people that don't talk to you anymore and you don't know if you said something wrong to them or what, the news always has some new terrorist attack or some political issue. And, by the way, you have some sins that continue to trouble you. Yes, life is a pain.

That's when you really appreciate a Good Shepherd, because life can really be a pain for a person. You need tender, loving care at the end of a hard day.

It is not really a question of whether or not there is pain in your life—mental, physical, emotional, spiritual. But where does it come from? What or who causes our pain?

Let's begin with this reality. We live in a fallen world. All of creation has been infected with sin and its consequences. As a result, we experience physical pain, illness, trials and tribulations. How does our Good Shepherd help us with that aspect of our pain-filled life? “Thou anointest my head with oil.” There is certainly medicinal imagery in these words.

For us who are blessed to live in or around this medical community, we see how the Good Shepherd helps us through doctors, nurses, medical specialists who care for our ailments. God be praised for all who serve in the healing and caring professions!

We must admit, other people are sometimes the cause of our pain.

Let's take an extreme example, Stephen, considered the first Christian martyr. Stephen, who boldly witnessed of his faith, was thrown out of the city and stoned to death. The last prayer on his lips: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (Acts 7:59) His reaction to those causing his pain (death!) was forgiveness. How could he possibly have responded that way?

“All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation...not counting their sins against them.”

Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd...I lay down my life for the sheep.” John 10

Christ has paid for all sins by His suffering and death, ours and the sins that have been committed against us, for which we may suffer unjustly. This is what enables us to forgive those who bring pain to our lives—only through Christ and His all-atoning death on the cross. Only through Christ could Stephen forgive; only through Christ are we able to forgive. O Holy Spirit, help us!

What else is the source of our pain? Remember in Catechism instruction our three spiritual enemies? Can you name them? The devil, the world, our sinful nature. They each contribute especially to our spiritual pain. They try to “deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice.” (6th Pet.)

This is where our Good Shepherd comes in. He deals with the devil. “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” (1 John 3:8) “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” (Heb. 2:14) And how does the Good Shepherd deal with the world? “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:17)

Jesus provides the green pastures and still waters of His Word and promises. This is why the church provides Word and Sacrament ministry so that we might be strengthened and encouraged through God’s promises. We need courage and strength to deal with the many layers of pain in our life, and our Good Shepherd wants us here to receive His gifts.

Our Good Shepherd invites:

“Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you will glorify me.” Ps. 50:15

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Matt. 11:28

“Cast all your anxieties on me, for I care about you.” 1 Peter 5:7

“Cast all your burden (pain) on me, I will sustain you.” Ps. 55:22

The rod and staff of God’s Word comforts us in the face of our spiritual enemies, giving us direction, correction and protection.

Now let’s zero in on our third spiritual enemy, our sinful nature. Often the pain in our lives is self-inflicted, caused by our own evil desires as James points out: “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” James 1:14-15

Our own sin can cause our greatest pain as we become self-centered and self-absorbed.

Recently my wife and I were in Florida, a trip that we call “for the birds” for they entertained us. Especially pelicans with their diving for fish out in the ocean. One day we visited a bird sanctuary where there were all kinds of exotic birds. There was a group of three pelicans that followed one of the workers around. He was carrying a yellow pail as he entered some storage room. They stood at attention as they waited for him to come out, which he soon did. They followed him to where he was going to fix something or do some cleaning. They stood at attention near him. I asked him what was going on with the Pelicans. He explained there was a person who sometimes carried food in this pail, and they were waiting for a treat. He had tools, not food, in the pail.

The desire for a treat had their complete attention. If you transfer that image to our human experience, we could say that since the Garden of Eden the desire to take care of ourselves in a self-centered way—“you could be like God”—has our complete attention. Our basic burden of sin is our desire to do what is in our best interest, what pleases us, rather than seeking to please God. We follow around our sinful, selfish desires like a pelican following a yellow pail.

Though we are sheep that have strayed, wandering far from the paths of righteousness our Good Shepherd has designed for us, yet He restores our soul giving us a fresh supply of forgiveness as we come to His table, forgiveness for our own sins, forgiveness we can share with others.

Our sin brings pain to our lives. But we have a Good Shepherd for our pains, One who restores our soul, who comforts us with His presence, granting us peace in the midst of turmoil and trouble

We have a Good Shepherd whose goodness and mercy pursue us every day and who promises that we will dwell in His house forever.

When life becomes a pain, remember we have a Shepherd for our pain. May you hear His voice, follow Him where He leads, even to His promised gift of eternal life. Amen.