

Misericordias Domini, A✠D 2009

John 10:11-16 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Why is the twenty-third psalm so comforting? The Lord is your shepherd? Who needs a shepherd? It's a two-way illustration: if the Lord's your shepherd, you must be His sheep. And if you think that's a cute way of describing Christians, you probably haven't spent much time around sheep. Sheep aren't cute and cuddly; they're smelly and obstinate. They're not very clever and perilously curious, prone to wander, to get tangled in bushes or fences, to graze among poisonous weeds. A cast sheep, rolled onto its back, unable to right itself, will die in a short period of time. They usually roam as a flock, so if one gets in trouble, they all do, even to the extent of fleeing together off a cliff to escape predators.

2 So why is it so comforting to hear the psalmist call himself a sheep? And why do even the Biblically illiterate know the beginning of Psalm 23? As if to add insult to injury, the Lord through the prophet Ezekiel calls His people sheep. Sure, He castigates the wicked, self-serving shepherds, the false prophets who mislead the Israelites, and there's a bit of comfort in that, but He still calls you a sheep. Even the Lord Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd who guards and tends the sheep. Sheep do need a shepherd to guard and guide them, but isn't there some more intelligent animal to which the Lord could have compared you? There's no escaping being called a sheep on Misericordia Domini, affectionately called "Good Shepherd Sunday." If there's a Shepherd, there must be some sheep.

3 In truth, though, as offensive as the picture might seem, to have the Lord call you a sheep is fairly accurate. Left to your own devices, you'll soon wander and get tangled in sin. Like a sheep, on your own, you're hopeless and helpless. You stray from the voice of the

Shepherd, from the Word of God. Instead of grazing in the green pastures where He would lead, you graze among the poisonous weeds of lust, anger, selfishness, and greed. Instead of being fed with the Word of God, which calls you out of sin into repentance, you'd much prefer to be fed with the word of the world, which calls you out of any sorrow over sin into false comfort and security in sinful pleasures. Your ears are curious, often to your own peril, listening to the wicked words of false shepherds who tell you that God welcomes you just the way you are, that God wants to make you prosperous, or that God allows anyone to approach Him through any way she sees fit. Repent. You simply can't defend yourself against the predators of sin and death. They stalk you like wolves and would gobble you up freely were it not for the Shepherd.

4 Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd, but His description of His style of shepherding doesn't seem like what a good shepherd would do. A shepherd would guard the sheep better than a hireling. He would lead his flock to green pastures and search after straying sheep. He would fight against wolves. All these Jesus certainly does for His sheep, but they're not why He calls Himself the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. How is that good shepherding? With the shepherd dead, the sheep have no one to guide or guard them. But the Good Shepherd saw the wolf death approaching and did not flee.

5 In fact, to face this wolf was the reason the Shepherd came. Until the Shepherd arrived, the wolf had free, unlimited access to the sheep. He could devour as many of them as he pleased, and the sheep—afraid of the wolf as they were—gave themselves over to him freely. But his appetite was insatiable. He was constantly hungry, constantly devouring sheep. Had the Good Shepherd not come to rescue the sheep from the wolf death, they would have remained hopeless and helpless. But the Shepherd did not flee when death stalked Him. In fact, the Shepherd sought death out in order to lay down His life for the sheep. Jesus went willingly to the cross to die, devoured by death. And when death swallowed the Shepherd, for the first time, his appetite was filled. And three days after being devoured by death, the Shepherd tore open death's belly and left him powerless and dying.

6 He is the Good Shepherd. Moreover, He is your Good Shepherd. He leads you through death into life. Death is powerless to hold those who follow the Good Shepherd, He leads them through the gaping hole He left in death's belly. He comforts you with His rod and staff, the crook of His cross, the reminder of His sacrifice to restore you to His fold. For you were straying like sheep, says St. Peter, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls. The Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep. He isn't good because He died. Rather, He died because He's good and because He seeks your good.

7 For all their faults, sheep have remarkably acute hearing. They can distinguish between a false shepherd and the Good Shepherd because only the Good Shepherd laid down His life for them. You know His voice. It's the voice that calls to you, leading you beside streams of living water, in the daily remembrance of your baptism, where the Shepherd delivered to you the benefits of His death and resurrection. He anoints your head with the oil of the Holy Spirit, who both delivered to you the gift of faith and preserves the gift He has delivered. He restores your soul with His soothing voice, speaking to you His word of Absolution, forgiving your sin and leading you in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

8 And He prepares a table before you in the presence of your enemies. In the midst of a world of sin and death, in the midst of the daily struggle against your sinful flesh, in the midst of the devil's temptations, in the midst of your enemies, the Lord spreads His table before you. The Good Shepherd feeds His sheep with His own flesh and blood. These are both the proof that He lives and death is dead and the guarantee that His sheep will live with Him forever. The Shepherd Himself promises, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." The Lord Jesus is your Shepherd, indeed. He is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for you. Because of Him, you shall not want.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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