

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
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The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
John 10:11-18  
May 7, 2006

*“The Shepherd Gives, The Shepherd Takes”*

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

There are many times that I have used hymns in illustrating points for a sermon. Well, today I am going to start with a song that serves as an excellent illustration for the theme for today: The Whiffenpoof Song. I discovered while searching the Internet that the song was written as the theme song of a male singing group at Yale University called the Whiffenpoofs. Now before you all wonder if I have completely lost my mind, bear with me. The song was written as a spoof of a poem by Rudyard Kipling but its words are a rather sad song of reminiscence and hopelessness. Indeed the introductory verse ends, "We will serenade our Louis, while life and voice shall last, then we'll pass and be forgotten with the rest ..." Now many of you probably do not know those words, but more of you do know the refrain that follows:

We're poor little lambs, who have lost our way  
Baa! Baa! Baa!  
We're little lost sheep who have gone astray  
Baa! Baa! Baa!  
Gentlemen songsters off on a spree  
Doomed from here to eternity  
Lord, have mercy on such as we;  
Baa! Baa! Baa!

It's a rather haunting melody, isn't it? Yet what more appropriate words as we consider the theme of this great and comforting Sunday of the Church year: Good Shepherd Sunday. For we hear the words of our Lord Jesus Christ stand in sharp contrast to the words of the Whiffenpoof Song and see in Him our hope, our comfort, and our joy.

I. The Lost Sheep

"We're poor little lambs, who have lost our way ..." In our modern, urban, metropolitan setting, it's probably very difficult at times to think of ourselves as lambs or as sheep. Some of our children may have never been close to a live lamb or sheep. But what more appropriate words could there be. Indeed, the words may be part of a very worldly song, but they are very Scriptural words. For does not the prophet Isaiah remind us, "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way." For as anyone who deals with sheep could tell you, sheep are not the most intelligent animals there are. They wander off. They fall down cliffs. They get lost. They need someone to shepherd them. And when Jesus used the illustration of a shepherd with his sheep in his parables and teaching there is really no better way to look at our lives.

In the world around us, we do not have to look far to see the results of this lostness. The headlines shout out at us about the violence of a world gone mad. There are many challenges and fears which are just below the surface of people's thoughts. It's terrorism. It's the bird flu. It's the violence of the streets. It's our own lives beset by sin and sorrow. And besides that, the Christian faith itself seems to be under attack. People hear about the Gospel of Judas or watch the television special on it and do not realize that it is just another example of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism. There is nothing new about it at all for it was known already about 180 A.D. and rejected for the foolishness it purports to present as knowledge. People read *The DaVinci Code* or soon will see the movie and will accept the claims of a work of fiction based on complete fabrications and fraud and will have their faith shaken by it. Or for those who know little of Christianity will easily accept it as an alternative view. The people of the world lost in the darkness and confusion around them need to find the truth. "We're little lost sheep who have gone astray ... Lord, have mercy on such as we. Baa! Baa! Baa!"

## II. The Good Shepherd Gives His Life

And the Lord does have mercy. For in sharp contrast to these thoughts and observations comes the comforting words of Jesus in the Gospel lesson for today: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." In the Greek text of John's Gospel, the first words of this lesson are very emphatic and probably quite difficult to get the full meaning of in translation. Literally they say: "I am the shepherd, the good one. There is no other shepherd like me." Jesus as the good shepherd is unique. And he lays down his life for the sheep. Yes, we have gone astray. Yes sin has damaged our lives. But the Lord of heaven and earth did not wish to leave us like sheep wandering without a shepherd. He sent his Son to this earth. The good shepherd came to lead us to green pasture and to living water. The good shepherd came to restore our souls. And yet this was not without cost. It cost the shepherd His life. He bought us back from sin by shedding his own precious blood. Many who study these verses see in them a contrast with real life. While it is true as Jesus said, that a hired hand who would see a wolf approaching would flee, it would also not make much sense in reality for a shepherd to die on behalf of his sheep. For once he was dead, who would protect them. They would be left merciless in the jaws of the wolf and other predators. The flock would be scattered and destroyed.

## III. The Good Shepherd Takes His Life Again

But of course, we have a unique and powerful Good Shepherd who cares for us. The Lord Jesus gave his life for us. But He also took his life back again. As Jesus said in the closing verses of our text: "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life--only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again." We still celebrate Easter. The Paschal candle continues to burn to remind us of the glory of the risen Lord. Our shepherd lives and he calls us to be his own. For while He gave his life for us, He also has taken it back. He lives and

rules in heaven that we "might be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." In the epistle lesson for this morning, St. John exults, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" At the end of the Epistle, John reminds us that we shall be like him. We shall see Him as He is. That is the Easter victory finding its fulfillment in glory, in our resurrection as well. And so we are his children because of the love of the Good Shepherd for us. And our Lord knows us as his beloved sheep, he calls us by name, we are his now and into eternity.

### Conclusion

Yes, Into eternity. This past week has driven that point home forcefully. Two of our faithful members have been called home by the Lord. Gus Azinger, rather suddenly, following a long struggle with debilitating illness. And also LaVerne Teske, who was called home following a long and faithful life of service and 65 years of marriage. Once again we are reminded of the ending of life on earth. As the Psalmist says, "Teach us to number our days". But we are also assured of Christ's victory over death. The grave could not hold him long. Death no longer has dominion over him. He has taken up his life again.

"We are Little lost sheep who have gone astray ..." No, not any more. Listen to the voice of the Shepherd: "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

And so through all the length of days  
Thy goodness faileth never.  
Good Shepherd may I sing thy praise  
Within thy house forever.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.