

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 29, 2007
Revelation 7:9-17

"The Lamb is the Shepherd"
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Our text for this day presents us with a literary mixup. Indeed if there was ever an illustration of mixed metaphors this would most certainly be it. In fact, it is picture that would appear ridiculous to anyone who has a knowledge of animals and their behavior. But at the same time, it is a comforting and faith strengthening picture to all believers in Christ. As we consider this morning in the words of our theme: "The Lamb is the Shepherd", may the Lord guide us by his word.

The Lamb

I am going to ask you to think back on the themes and illustrations which have been used in the last weeks in our worship going all the way back to Holy Week and Easter. Perhaps even before that. The image of the Lamb has certainly played a large role in our worship. During Lent on several occasions we sang the song, "The Lamb" as our canticle. You know it well: (sing) That is a fitting picture. For the idea that Jesus would be the sacrifice for our sins finds its source in the prophetic Scriptural story of the Passover and the meal and offering of the perfect unblemished lamb whose blood was sprinkled on the doorposts on the night of the Passover. And that theme was emphasized on Maundy Thursday evening in the seder meal during which our youth reminded those present of the powerful connection between the Passover celebration and our Lord's institution of his Supper. Then on Good Friday we heard again the moving words of the prophet Isaiah, "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and like a sheep before its shearers silent so he opened not his mouth." We sang the hymn of Paul Gerhardt, "A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth, the guilt of all men bearing ..." The lamb as sacrifice is a very clear picture before us. Did not John the Baptist say in pointing to Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

But we are not done with the picture of the lamb yet. On Easter Sunday, the illustration began to change. A reading that is sometimes used on Easter is the words of St. Paul, "For Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed for us ..." It is no longer the suffering sacrificial lamb we see, but the living triumphant lamb. "The day of resurrection, earth tell it out abroad, the passover of gladness, the passover of God ..." "At the Lamb's high feast we sing, praise to our victorious king" we sang. And since Easter as our hymn of praise we have sung again with great joy, "Worthy is Christ, the lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God. This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia. For the Lamb who was slain has begun his reign. Alleluia!" We cannot seem to escape the picture of the lamb. Last Sunday's Epistle from the Revelation to St. John is the Scriptural basis for that hymn of praise. It is the glorious vision of the victory of the Lamb. For before the Lamb those who dwell in

heaven sing, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain and with your blood you purchased men for God ..." And the triumphant song of the countless host of heaven resounds to eternity: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power, and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing." So when we sing that song of praise we join our voices with the saints above.

And the epistle for this week would only reinforce that picture. John sees the vision of the great multitude that no one can number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with Palm branches in their hands and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb?" When in his vision, one of the elders asks John, who are these in white robes?" and John replies, "Sir, you know" –the answer is clear, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." The Lamb is still before us. In all his glory! In this vision, it is Palm Sunday, and Good Friday, and Easter all together. But right in the midst of this glorious vision comes the change in the picture. The change that would appear impossible. "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd ..." The lamb is the shepherd.

II. The Shepherd

Watch the image change before your eyes. He who is the Lamb, who was slain for us, is also the Shepherd, the Good Shepherd of the sheep. This Sunday (week) has for many years been observed as Good Shepherd Sunday and so fittingly as the hymn of the day we sang, "The King of Love my Shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never." Sheep need help. They need someone to guide and lead them. They need a shepherd. So do we. Once more from the prophet Isaiah: "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

That is why picture changes. The lamb is the shepherd. In the vision of John, the Lamb who is the shepherd will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. I am sure that in these words there is a reference to the words of the 23rd Psalm. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. When we talked about the planning for the worship service this week, we discussed not overusing the 23rd Psalm, which can happen on Good Shepherd Sunday. Well, we have not overused it, but the familiar comforting and blessed words of that Psalm are certainly present in the thoughts of this day. The Lord who is our shepherd supplies us with all our needs right up to the day when we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

In the Gospel lesson for today, we hear Jesus' words and his perspective. It is noteworthy, that in the Gospels, Jesus does not speak of himself as the lamb. That description of him comes from others. He does speak of himself as the shepherd however. He quotes from Scripture on the night of his betrayal, "Strike the Shepherd and the sheep will be scattered." And most certainly in the Gospel of John, he speaks of himself in great detail as the Good

Shepherd. "I am the Good Shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." It is significant that even in some of these sayings, Jesus speaks of the sacrifice he will make. But he also speaks of his love in gathering the sheep and looking for the lost and caring for them. And in the words of the Gospel for today, we hear his words, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." Our living loving Lord has called us to be his. And nothing, nothing can separate us from his love. As Jesus said, "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." That is the promise of our salvation.

III. The Shepherd in the Church

To conclude our picture for this day, in the First Reading, St. Paul speaks to the elders at Ephesus and reminds them, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." There is the flock again. The shepherds are those entrusted with their care. The Lord has gathered us all into his church. He feeds us with his word of grace. He has entrusted to the ministry the task of caring for the sheep. As a pastor, I recognize this great responsibility and privilege to feed the flock of Christ. And there are many occasions when the thought crosses my mind, as I am sure it does that of every pastor—there is so much to do. What have I failed to accomplish this day that should have been done? How can I shepherd all these people? We remember the straying lambs and say, there are so many to seek. Lord, give us the strength and love to serve. Pray for us pastors. Hold up our hands with your support and care. In some ways, all of us as well have someone that the Lord has given to us to shepherd. Lead them as well to the great and good shepherd of our souls.

And finally, to him be the glory and praise. For remember, the lamb is the shepherd. As we sang in the office hymn:

Praised be the true Lamb,
slain for our redemption.
By whose self offering we are made God's people
A priestly kingdom,
from all tongues and nations,
Called to God's service.

To the Almighty,
Throned in heavenly splendor,
And to the Savior,
Christ our Lamb and Shepherd,
Be adoration, praise and glory given
Now and forever.

In the name of our Lamb and Shepherd. Amen.