

Images of Our Good Shepherd
Easter 4
April 30, 2023
Psalm 23

Dear Friends in Christ:

Several years ago I served as a vice president for Lutheran Church - Canada. One of the joyful tasks of the council of presidents each year is to make assignments for the new church workers who are ready to be placed into service in the congregations and schools of our church. We placed new pastors, teachers and directors of parish services as well as vicars and interns into congregations and schools which have requested them. One year our meeting took place at one of the Seminaries of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and we had the opportunity to participate in the call service where more than 60 theological candidates received their first assignments. The following night the assignments were made to more than 70 candidates at the St. Louis seminary. In LCC that year we placed 9 pastoral candidates, 8 vicars, 1 DPS candidate and 5 DPS interns. What a great joy it is to acknowledge and give thanks to God for the new workers He provides for His church!

Just before the call service that year we began to hear the news about the horrific events that were taking place at the Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. We were so horrified that someone could enter a school with a gun intent on destroying the lives of children! That event seemed to be the beginning of increasingly frequent and horrible mass murders taking place in the United States. However, I was reminded also of a similar horrific crime that took place in that women's dormitory in Montreal a few years ago. It seems that just as we begin to think that we have learned some lessons and that we have made changes for the better, the evil breaks forth once more — in Montreal, in Kentucky, in Oregon, in Connecticut, in Colorado. Since 1999 there have been 377 school shootings. The culture of death, murder and mayhem, is so pervasive in today's world. But that isn't new.

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus speaks about intruders who seek to steal and kill and destroy the sheep. He goes on to tell about the true shepherd who cares for and protects his sheep and finally identifies himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his own life for his sheep.

We certainly need such a shepherd who can calm our fears and keep us safe. This morning I would like to take a look at some of the images of our Good Shepherd that we see in the 23rd Psalm. It used to be that all children were required to memorize the 23rd Psalm in school. Since that no longer happens in school, Christian parents should see that their children learn this Psalm at home. Not only is this Psalm one of the most important writings in all literature, it is extremely important for the nurturing of our children's faith. Let me show you why.

The first image we see is that of the **"Providing Shepherd"**. What a blessing it is to know that my shepherd is the Lord God, the maker of heaven and earth. He created this world as my home and he provides me with all that I need from day to day. Luther reminds us that He "has given me my body and soul, eyes and ears, my reason and all my senses and still preserves them. Also clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land and animals and all my goods; that He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life." Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I truly have everything I need, I lack nothing.

Our Good Shepherd is a **“Feeding Shepherd”**. The psalm tells us that “He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.” Where are the green pastures and the quiet waters? What do those images refer to? There must be a deeper, more significant meaning to these pictures. Jesus once quoted an Old Testament verse when Satan tempted him to turn stones into loaves of bread. He said: “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

What kind of diet breeds violence and the culture of death? What kind of a diet produces children who kill children? Is it not the diet of self-centered indulgence, a diet devoid of discipline and love? Are we feeding our children the wrong food and giving them bad water to drink? We permit six and seven year olds to see violent movies intended for a much older audience. We provide them opportunities to watch musical videos that are intended to arouse and stimulate sexual desire, while we fail to discuss with them their normal, healthy desires and how to use them responsibly in marriage. We see crowds of people cheering so-called wrestlers as they perpetrate violence upon one another and justify it by saying that it’s all an act and simple entertainment. The fact is, there is a food that leads to death and we need to recognize such food and avoid it and shelter our children and youth from it. That the parent’s job of shepherding.

From all indications the parents of those two youth who caused such horror in Colorado were normal, ordinary parents. And that is the truly frightening part. What has become normal and ordinary in our society is evil. And the good food which our Good Shepherd provides in His holy Word is ignored — particularly by parents who, in their zeal to provide all the educational and physical opportunities possible have failed to shepherd their children’s spiritual needs.

Our Good Shepherd has given us the bread of life and living waters so that we may live. He feeds us with his very body and blood which grant us forgiveness for our sins, eternal life and salvation. The result of eating our Good Shepherd’s food and drinking from His stream is the restoration of my soul. My soul once again is at peace, restored, made whole when I eat in His pastures and drink from his stream.

Another image we see in the Psalm is that our Good Shepherd is a **“Guiding Shepherd”**. He guides us in two ways. The Psalm says: “He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” This is the normal path our life as his sheep is to take. Without his guiding I will take a different pathway — the pathway of popularity will take me one way, the pathway of success and riches will take me another. The pathway of power, still another. So many different pathways and so many different ways for sheep to get lost, to be led astray. But our Good Shepherd calls his sheep to follow the path of righteousness. That means living and doing what is right in life, avoiding the evil and avoiding the paths that lead to evil. This, too, parents must help their children to understand. Following Jesus Christ is the only way that leads us safely through this life.

There is another way in which our Good Shepherd guides us. Not only in the normal pathways of life, but also in those times when we may experience great evil. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...” Sudden terror and violence and death cause great fear. That’s a normal reaction. What is abnormal is to believe that God is with me during such a time. We would think that God has abandoned us to the evil. We might think that God isn’t

there in Kosovo or that He wasn't there in that Colorado High School. But David, the writer of this Psalm tells us differently. Our Good Shepherd is there, with us through the evil. He uses his rod and staff — the rod to defend us from the predators and the staff to shepherd us through the evil, just as that High School teacher shepherd his own flock away from danger, at the price of his own life. He was a good shepherd for his students, just as Jesus is The Good Shepherd who laid down his life for His sheep. Only, in Jesus' case, it wasn't to give his life so that his disciples could be physically saved from death, but to give them eternal life and salvation.

You see, our Good Shepherd's protection is for more than just this earthly life of ours. As precious as life is and as horrible a thing it is to wantonly destroy life, we must know and believe that there is a fate worse than physical death and that is spiritual death. To keep me safe from that evil my Good Shepherd gave His life. And to keep me safe for eternal life he will always protect me and see me through the valley, even if it means walking through the valley of physical suffering and temporal death.

Another image we see in this psalm is our Good Shepherd as an **"Honoring Shepherd"**. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Being a follower of the Good Shepherd will cause us to have enemies. Enemies of Christ will seek to put us to shame, to mock our faith and put down our beliefs. They will call us names and assault our convictions. That's the price we willingly pay to follow our Savior. But our Good Shepherd sets a bountiful table for us in the presence of our enemies. He vindicates our faith and upholds our trust in Him. So many times Jesus spoke of the kingdom of heaven as a banquet table or a wedding feast. The ultimate vindication over our enemies will be when we sit down at table with our Lord in his heavenly kingdom.

The final image of our Good Shepherd that we see in our Psalm is the **"Healing Shepherd"**. "You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows," and the result: "surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." When sheep were injured by their daily travels or by the assaults made upon them, the shepherd poured olive oil on their wounds and tended to each one. That oil was poured from a cup to cleanse and soothe the injury. In New Testament times olive oil was still used for healing. James 5:14 says: "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord." For all the hurts and injuries inflicted upon us in life, we have our Good Shepherd's healing oil — the Gospel of salvation. This is the cup that overflows for us — the unending love and ever-present mercy and grace for us sinners. He heals our wounds of body and soul. He grants us perfect healing, perfect forgiveness, perfect peace so that we also may "dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Have you ever tried to find the hidden picture in an autostereogram? Autostereograms are those confusing pictures that remind you of a wallpaper pattern but with no picture that makes sense. The way to find the picture is to get your eyes to focus just right. One way is to hold the picture close to your nose for a few moments and then focus on one spot in the design and slowly back the picture away from your face. Suddenly you see it! "Wow! Isn't that great? Fantastic!" are common comments when seeing the 3 dimensional picture for the first time.

Sometimes life is like an autostereogram — a confusing picture with no sense to it. Chaotic events and senseless violence may cause us to wonder if there is any purpose or objective to our life. The hidden design is only discovered when our eyes focus on the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who laid

down his life for the sheep and who loves us forever. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God forever. **Amen.**