

The Rev. Joel Petruschke  
Our Saviour/St. Stephen  
April 21, 2024  
Easter 4

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today's gospel reading is such an interesting passage of Scripture.

It is such an interesting passage of Scripture for a number of reasons.

It is a passage that begins with an announcement from our Lord, who says, "I am the Good Shepherd."

And this is a loaded statement.

First and foremost because it is one of several "I am-statements" in the Gospel of John.

Some of the other "I am-statements" spoken by Jesus in the Gospel of John include:

I am the light of the world.

I am the way, the truth, and the life.

I am the gate.

I am the true vine.

And so on and so forth.

And these "I am-statements" remind us of God the Father, who in the Old Testament is the great "I AM".

For at one point, when Moses is talking with God, Moses asks God for God's name, and God replies, "I Am."

So that is God's name.

And the Gospel of John runs with God's OT name, with further details about who God is in the person the Jesus Christ, so that we get all these "I am-statements" from Jesus.

I AM the true vine. I AM the gate. I AM the way, the truth, and the life.

PAUSE

Here in our Gospel reading today Jesus says, "I AM the Good Shepherd."

And with this announcement, Jesus also is tapping into a long tradition of shepherd imagery.

Kings in the OT were often described as shepherds, for kings shepherded their people.

And some prophets in the OT were also shepherds by trade, like Elisha, Moses, and Amos.

The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were also shepherds.

And, even God's self, is described as a shepherd, as we read in Psalm 23 and elsewhere in the OT.

Yes, shepherd and sheep are everywhere in the OT.

And, here, in our gospel reading for today, Jesus describes himself as a shepherd, but he does not describe himself like every other shepherd out there.

No, Jesus describes himself as THE...GOOD...SHEPHERD.

PAUSE

And notice why...NOTICE WHY Jesus calls himself THE GOOD SHEPHERD.

Jesus is THE good shepherd because Jesus lays down his life for the sheep.

Yes, Jesus explains that he is the GOOD SHEPHERD because of his death and resurrection, because Jesus has the power to lay down his life for the sheep, and the power to take his life up again.

"Death and resurrection" is what makes Jesus the Good Shepherd.

PAUSE

But, there is something else of particular interest in this Gospel reading.

It is the very last sentence in this passage, where Jesus says, “I have received this command from my Father.”

In short, Jesus says that he lays down his life for the sheep, because he has been commanded to do so by God the Father.

And, this, this commandment from God might give us pause.

We have to stop and wonder, “What kind of God commands his own Son to lay down his life?”

What kind of God commands his own Son to die on the cross?

PAUSE

Now, there is a similar story in the Old Testament.

If we remember God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and Abraham almost does so.

Abraham is about to bring the blade down upon his son.

But then, God stays Abraham’s hand, and Isaac is spared.

But come the story of Jesus, and we see that God the Father allows his own Son to be crucified.

God allows for his own son to be sacrificed.

And yes, it should give us pause.

It should make us stop and wonder, “What kind of God is this?”

PAUSE

Indeed, we can’t help but be perplexed by this.

We can’t help but be bothered by this.

What kind of God is this, that God allows, even commands his own Son to be sacrificed?

PAUSE

Now, yes, the Gospel writer John does appear to soften this harsh reality somewhat.

The Gospel writer John depicts Jesus as saying, “I (Jesus) way down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”

As if to say, Jesus has agency here.

As if to say, Jesus himself is inclined to self-sacrifice.

But, in truth this doesn’t soften the harsh reality.

Because we can’t get around that last sentence from Jesus in this passage, “I have received this COMMAND from my Father.”

And personally, I have never really known what to do with this.

What do we do with a God that commands his own Son’s death?

And, I don’t pretend to have an answer for you now.

It is one of those enigmas, wrapped in a conundrum, surrounded by mystery.

It doesn’t make sense.

It doesn’t make sense that an all-loving God commands his Son to be crucified. But there you have it.

PAUSE

But what the Christian message wants to focus on, is not this enigma, wrapped in a conundrum, surrounded by mystery.

No, instead the Christian message wants to focus on the FAITHFULNESS of Jesus Christ.

The Christian message wants to highlight the faithful OBEDIENCE of Jesus Christ.

Yes, to be sure, Christianity wants to emphasize, wants to stress, and otherwise underscore the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled the will of God the Father.

Whereas we, each and every last one of us, falls short of absolute obedience to God's will, Jesus proves more that up to the task.

And, this...this ultimately is what makes our Lord Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd.

The rest of us, like the hired hand in the story, we see the wolf coming and we high tail it out of there.

The rest of us run away, we fall short, and we fail to be obedient to God.

But Jesus...Jesus lays down his life for the sheep.

Jesus is obedient to the very end.

PAUSE

And this is ultimately what we bet our lives on.

This is what we are banking on, staking our hope on.

We cling with everything we have to Christ's obedience to Christ's faithfulness.

Because if that is not certain, everything else in our Faith collapses.

If Jesus was not obedient, then Jesus did not truly obey God's command.

If Jesus did not truly obey God's command, then he did not die on the cross.

And if Jesus did not die on the cross, then we remain in our sin, and indeed we are people most to be pitied.

And so, this is what is the foundation of everything.

That Jesus was faithful to God's command.

And if Jesus is faithful to God's command to lay down his life, then Jesus is also faithful in everything else.

Particularly, Jesus is faithful to intercede on our behalf before the judgment seat of God the Father.

That Jesus is faithful such that Jesus will plead for us that we may be forgiven before God the Father.

That Jesus is faithful and we will receive mercy from God.

PAUSE

Now, you know, in the all of the history of art—paintings, and drawings, and sculptures of Jesus—I can't recall a single representation in art of an image of the heavenly Jesus pleading at the judgment seat of God for sinners.

In my mind's eye I can see several images of Jesus on the cross.

I can see several images of the crucifixion that have been depicted in art.

I can see several images of that depiction of Jesus' faithfulness to God's command.

But, I can't for the likes of me ever remember an image of Jesus pleading for sinners before God.

Which I think is unfortunate.

Because that is what the cross really means; if Jesus is faithful to the command of God to die on the cross, then Jesus is absolutely faithful pleading our case before God the Father.

In fact, we are all but assured of God's mercy because of Jesus' faithfulness.

So, short of thinking of an image of Jesus pleading our case before God, we can, and should, remember the cross.

The cross is Jesus' testimony before God the Father on our behalf.

If we wonder about whether Jesus successfully pleads our case before the judgement of God, all we need to do is look to the cross.

PAUSE

So, yes, today's passage from the Gospel of John is most interesting for a number of reasons.

It is a passage of great importance because again, it tells us why Jesus alone is the Good Shepherd.

Not just because Jesus lays down his life for the sheep.

But because Jesus is obedient.

Jesus has received the command from God, and Jesus has fulfilled that command.

And so, the best image of the Good Shepherd who wins our case before God...

That best image of the Good Shepherd is the image of that same Son of God who is but a lamb that has been sacrificed for us on the cross.

Thanks be to God. Amen.