

Rescued From the Depths

Meta

Date: May 10, 2025

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Numbers 27:12–23

Psalm 100

Revelation 7:9–17

John 10:22–30

Opening

I'd like to begin by wishing a Happy Mother's Day to all mothers, whether they be mothers in the flesh or in the spirit, as our collect says for Mother's Day. Mother's Day converges with Good Shepherd Sunday in the year of our Lord 2025. Many of us did not grow up in an Anglican church, but for those few multigenerational Anglicans among us, it's interesting that our grandmothers and great-grandmothers would not have known a Good Shepherd Sunday in the Eastertides of their day. Good Shepherd Sunday has only been celebrated each Eastertide since the 1970s. How the decade of disco and bellbottoms also produced Good Shepherd Sunday is a question for another day.

Some changes the church considered in the 20th century were profoundly bad ideas, but the devotion of one Sunday in Eastertide to Christ the Good Shepherd is a profoundly *good* idea. Among the names and images that our Lord Jesus fulfills, the good shepherd speaks to the deepest needs of our lives. In times of loss and trial, of darkness and doubt, who has not turned to Christ to be the good shepherd of their souls? What is the most beloved psalm, known even among unbelievers? The 23rd psalm, which begins, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.'

The Church was wise to devote an entire Sunday to Christ the Good Shepherd in her calendar. She had even greater wisdom to place this celebration, this meditation, in Eastertide. Some of our feast days coincide with agricultural rhythms, such as Rogation Days. It would make sense if we observed Good Shepherd Sunday during lambing season, which would be late February and the month of March. But in her wisdom, the Church leads us to contemplate the Good Shepherd in Eastertide. *This* is the season to ponder the meaning of the Good Shepherd for our lives. *This* is the day we gaze into the blessing that our Good Shepherd, risen from the dead, brings to our faith. And that is the mystery I want to explore this morning.

Section 1

The image of the shepherd is a dominant image throughout the story of scripture. If someone asked you to summarize the Bible, you could do so simply by telling the biblical story through the image of a

shepherd. How God created us to be the sheep of his pasture, to know his voice. How the Lord not only created us, but made our home in paradise, a place of good pasture. How we all like sheep went astray after our first parents fell into sin. How the Lord appointed leaders—prophets, priests, and kings—who have the heart of the shepherd. Prophets and shepherds like Moses, Joshua, and Amos; priests like Aaron; shepherd kings like David and Solomon. How God himself became our shepherd in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ after his prophets, priests, and kings went astray, forsaking the way of the Lord, just like our first parents.

The Great Shepherd, Reaching Down to the Tomb

When we celebrate Christ the Good Shepherd, we do not set apart a Sunday in March or Ordinary Time to contemplate this theme. We celebrate Christ the Good Shepherd in Eastertide, the great 50 days of Easter, when he appears in his risen body, having trampled down death by death, and restoring life to those in the tombs.

Look at the icon of the resurrection on the cover of your bulletin. Here is the image, not only of the risen Christ, but of Christ the Good Shepherd. Surrounding Christ are shepherd figures from Israel's past. David and Solomon on the left, shepherd kings, great kings who still fell short of their calling. On the right, we see Abel, the shepherd who died at the hand of his brother, Cain. Abel stands next to St. John the Baptist, who called the sheep of Israel to repentance when they had gone astray. None of these, great as they were, could achieve the high calling of the Good Shepherd.

Christ, our Good Shepherd, knew that a prophecy spoken by Zechariah would be fulfilled in him. On the night of his arrest, when he was on the Mount of Olives with his disciples, Jesus said to his disciples:

*You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written (by Zechariah), 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.*¹

He knew that God anointed him to be the Good Shepherd, the shepherd who would be struck and abandoned by his sheep. But this would not be the end. Though they abandoned him in their fear, he would never leave or forsake them. Christ describes himself as the Good Shepherd, but the writer of Hebrews, focused on our Lord's resurrection calls him not good, but *great*. These words from Hebrews comprise the priestly blessing we hear throughout Eastertide:

*Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, **the great shepherd of the sheep**, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.*²

Christ reveals himself not only as the good shepherd who calls his sheep, who know his voice; not only as the shepherd who sacrifices himself for his sheep. He is the *great shepherd of the sheep*, who descended into hell to trample down death by death and restore life to those in the tombs.

¹ *Matthew 26.31-32*

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Heb 13:20-21.*

Look once more at the cover of your bulletin. Look again at the great shepherd of the sheep, our Lord Jesus risen from the dead. He's reaching down into the depths with his two hands. On his left, he is lifting Adam out of hell. On his right, he lifts Eve out of hell.

This is the image, the visual theology of the words we heard from John 10 this morning

*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. 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.*³

When our Lord says something twice, we do well to notice. Twice Jesus said, 'no one will snatch them out of my hand.' Those of you who, in former years, may have found yourselves in the vortex of Calvinist and Arminian debates about predestination and eternal security, expand your vision to a more mystical vision of the Gospel.

Christ made Adam and Eve to be the sheep of his pasture, placing them in his garden. They knew his voice, calling to them his presence in the cool of the day. They sinned, they entered exiled, but they still belonged to the Lord. Still they lived in faith. They knew pain, they knew suffering. They died before the dawn of redemption when Christ took on a body and atoned for our sins. But on Easter, Christ the Great Shepherd of the sheep bestowed life on those in the tombs, lifting Adam and Eve by their hands because the Lord promised 'no one will snatch my sheep out of my hand.'

Unafraid of Death

From this perspective we can derive three insights. One, we are the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve and this means that we, too, will die one day. When Jesus promises his disciples that they will not perish, he does not mean they would avoid death in the body. Christ said that all who hear his voice would have eternal life, meaning that we would not perish in the *next* life. Those disciples who followed our Lord; who then left him when he was nailed to the cross; who became witnesses of his resurrection, these would die in the body—many of whom would suffer greatly, dying the death of martyrs.

Something happened to them after Easter. Something happened after Jesus appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room, at the village of Emmaus, at the Sea of Galilee. And this is the second insight. In the course of these great fifty days of Easter, they were losing the fear of death—death in the body. Their Great Shepherd suffered the most gruesome, horrible death in the body, and he rose from the dead. Death in the body they could endure because their Great Shepherd conquered death.

On Easter, I mentioned to you the writings of the early church father, St. Athanasius, who wrote about the great boldness of Christians, children included, who were not only *unafraid of* death, but even mocked death. Athanasius wrote:

*As when a tyrant has been defeated by a legitimate king and bound hand and foot, all those that then pass by mock him, hitting and reviling him, no longer fearing his fury and barbarity because of the victorious king; **in this way death also having been conquered and placarded by the Savior on the cross, and bound hand and foot**, all those in Christ who pass by trample on death, and witnessing to Christ they*

³ John 10:27–29 (ESV)

*mock death, jeering at him, and saying what was written above, “O death, where is your victory? O hell, where your sting?”*⁴

Unafraid of Suffering

By the time we come to Pentecost, the fiftieth day of Easter, we will see and hear disciples who are restored in Christ and have become bold in his Name. And this brings us to our final insight. In the book of Acts, we encounter disciples who not only aren't afraid of death, *they are unafraid of suffering.*

⁴ *St Athanasius the Great of Alexandria, On the Incarnation: Translation, ed. and trans. John Behr, vol. 44a, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 109.*

It's a bit ironic that we might fear suffering more than death. Facing death, a Christian, baptized in Christ, may have peace and confidence in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. 'To be absent in the body is to be present with the Lord.' But what about the lesser forms of death—of pain that doesn't take consume my body, but pain that consumes weeks, months, years? Pain that clings not only to my body, but to my mind, my memories, and my soul.

Be of good courage, dear ones, who know the voice of your Good Shepherd. No one will snatch you out of his hand. Trust in his defense, his help, and you will not perish. You and I *will* suffer. We are sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. But just as death came through a man, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. And in Christ, you need fear neither death *nor* suffering. Do not fear the pain, whether past, present, or future.

It will not be pleasant, it will not come easily. But this is the inheritance of saints, risen with Christ in baptism. The Good Shepherd delivers you from death, from the *fear of death*, and from the *fear of suffering*.

Think of the apostles after they witnessed the Lord's resurrection. Think of the apostles after the day of Pentecost. These are the apostles, led by Peter, who betrayed the Lord. But after Easter Day, after Pentecost, in Acts 5, the council demanded the apostles cease proclaiming Jesus as Lord. They refused. The apostles were then beaten for proclaiming Christ. These apostles, former cowards, left the council *rejoicing* that they could suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus.⁵

Unafraid of death, unafraid of suffering because their Good Shepherd was risen from the dead. No one could snatch their life from his hands. They would die in the body, but they would never perish. So shall we. We will die, but we will never perish. For after all we suffer in this life—whether body, mind, or spirit—we will die and then be gathered in the presence of our Good Shepherd, who will make us new. And there we will live with him forever, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, unto ages of ages. Amen.

⁵ Acts 5.40-41