

Lord God, heavenly Father, out of Your divine goodness You have been mindful of us wandering sheep, and have given Your beloved Son to be our Shepherd, not only to nourish us by His Word, but also to defend us from sin, death, and the devil: watch over us that we may never stray from You. Into Your tender hands we commend ourselves, our bodies and souls and all things. Amen.

[Jesus continued saying:] For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may 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 I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from My Father." ... 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. I and the Father are one." The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone Me?" The Jews answered Him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make Yourself God." Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came--and Scripture cannot be broken-- do you say of Him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? If I am not doing the works of My Father, then do not believe Me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me and I am in the Father."

In Christ Jesus, who as our Good Shepherd both laid down His own life and took it up again, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness, dear fellow redeemed:

We hear of David as a faithful shepherd taking on fierce predators who threatened his flock. When Goliath was threatening Israel, David volunteered to take on the challenge. "King Saul said to David, 'You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth.' But David said to Saul, 'Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.'" (1Sam. 17:33-36)

But as great a good shepherd that David was, he eventually died and was buried. His remains still rest asleep upon this earth. But our one and only Good Shepherd did not abandon us in death. He did die rescuing us, but it was not possible for Him to be held by death. He was more than a man after God's own heart. You see: **The Only Shepherd Who Raises Himself Is God.**

I

Scripture is filled with examples of great shepherds: Abel, Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses but none of them were able to raise themselves after they died. They too will need to be raised by God. It does not go well for the flock if the shepherd falls in his confrontation with the predator. Jesus knew this, but still could speak with confidence even though the battle He waged resulted in His death. As they left the upper room to go to the Mount of Olives on the night He was betrayed Jesus said to His disciples: "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, '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."

It is true that Scripture speaks of God the Father raising the Lord Jesus. For example in Romans we read: "We were buried therefore with [Christ Jesus] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." This does not contradict the words of Jesus that He would raise Himself, but rather supports the truth that as Jesus says in our text: "I and the Father are one." This is the mystery of the Trinity at work for our salvation. Paul earlier in the same letter to the Romans clearly teaches this: "[Jesus Christ our Lord] was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead."

Jesus' enemies knew what Jesus was claiming about His ability to raise Himself from the dead. He was claiming to be God. For this reason they picked up stones to stone Him to death. When Jesus challenged them and asked for what good work were they going to stone Him, they responded: "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make Yourself God."

Of course Jesus did not make Himself God, He is God from eternity, who came as promised to rescue all sinners from their sin, death and hell. He did this in full obedience of the Father's will. God is love. The Father loves His Son from eternity and the Son loves the Father, but what is especially comforting to us is that the Father loves us through His Son. As Jesus puts it: "For this reason the Father loves

Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it up again." For whom does Jesus lay down His life? For whom does Jesus take up His life again? For you and me and all people.

II

This life in this fallen world is filled with shepherd type leaders who are followed by what you may have heard used pejoratively, *sheeple*. Politicians, cult leaders, militia commanders, mega-church ministers who call their ministries after themselves will take on the role of shepherd and gather a flock of *sheeple* who depend on their every word.

But as appealing as their words may be to those who follow them promising certain advantages in this life, it is much different with the Good Shepherd. As Jesus said: "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." This Good Shepherd is alone the One who can promise eternal life, because He laid down His life as He stood up to the roaring lion who seeks to devour us, namely Satan. In laying down His life in our place, this predator was defeated, because our Good Shepherd took up His life again by rising from the dead.

With sin, death and hell all defeated there is no other predator that can tear us from the Shepherd's strong hand. As Jesus again pointed out His divine nature, He adds this: "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. I and the Father are one."

But understand what is being promised here. Our Lord has given us the means whereby we remain in His protective grasp. But some foolishly conclude by these words of Jesus, that we His sheep can never be lost. Because of our sin we are sheep who stupidly love to wander as Isaiah points out "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way." Are there not greener pastures where the Law seems to empower us, making us into strong worthy followers of the Lord God?

The day after Easter, while doing yard work, a bicyclist came by with whom I have had previous casual conversations. He knew I was a Lutheran pastor, so he spoke to me this time about spiritual matters. It became clear that even though he considered himself to be a Christian he was going astray from the appointed ways in which our Good Shepherd promises to hold on to us. In speaking of the personal relationship with Jesus, which he said was necessary, he asked if I had one with Jesus. I said: *"Most certainly, yesterday, Easter, I had the risen Lord Jesus come to me in His supper putting in my mouth the*

very body He gave and the very blood He shed." Dubiously he asked how that made me feel? Was I filled with joy? Again I said: "*Most certainly.*" Then we spoke about baptism. He disparaged water baptism. His greener pastures were nothing but man caused wastelands, yet according to his sinful imagination he thought them to be preferred over the green pastures the Good Shepherd has established for us.

My fellow sheep of the Good Shepherd repent of your desires to wander off into the wastelands of your fertile imaginations. Be assured there is forgiveness for you for all such wanderings, because this Good Shepherd became the very Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, all sin. You are safe in His divine arms. Although predators still seek to steal you away, trust in the One alone who by raising Himself from the dead promises you eternal life. Follow His life-giving voice in Word and Sacrament, then you are safe indeed. Amen.