

O Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd of the sheep, gather Your sheep, those who go scattered here and there. O gather them, each and every one, into the real sheepfold. Feed them in fair pastures. And set them free from the wolf! Amen. (*Book of Family Prayer, N. J. Laache, Lutheran Synod Book Co., 2000, p. 310, adapted*)

**The cities of the Levites in the midst of the possession of the people of Israel were in all forty-eight cities with their pasturelands.** These cities each had its pasturelands around it. So it was with all these cities. Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that He swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as He had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. **Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.**

In Christ Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who leads us to the safe green pastures, free and safe from all predators, dear fellow redeemed:

In these days of the pandemic, we have especially focused on those who fulfill certain essential vocations – medical workers, first-responders, grocers, etc. Have you noticed in our treatment of these Old Testament accounts that often the leaders chosen by God have been in one particular vocation? They often have been shepherds: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. Soon we will be considering David, the shepherd boy anointed king. There are others.

In today's text we learn of the Levites and their God-given connection with shepherding. It was not that they were all shepherds, but in their settling in the promise land, this Tribe was not receiving a certain portion of the promise land for their possession, but they were to be scattered throughout Israel in forty-eight cities with pasturelands around them. On this day when we consider how our Lord functions for us as a Shepherd, we shall note He tenderly provides for us, His sheep, with eternal spiritual care. So we observe: **The Good Shepherd Settles His Flock in Promised Green Pastures.**

### I

When Jacob blessed his twelve sons, he gave this pronouncement concerning the descendants of Levi: "I will scatter them and disperse them in Israel". At first this scattering may have seemed to be a curse, rather it was a blessing. By God's grace, Levi became the priestly tribe. Eight of the forty-eight cities would function as cities of refuge for all of Israel. While never possessing its

own designated region, as the other tribes, Levi's priestly office and functions made it a sacred and revered position among all of Israel.

There were three family clans of the Levites who served in various ways. One served as the priestly clan the others as caretakers of the tabernacle. While wandering for 40 years a constant task of transporting the tabernacle was a prominent feature of their work, it would now be diminished considerably after settling in the promise land. They would, besides performing the priestly duties like sacrifices, they would now especially teach the Law of the Lord to the Israelites. Part of the tithe from the other tribes would be designated to support the Levites as they performed these churchly duties throughout Israel.

Now consider the pasturelands that surrounded these forty-eight cities. This would provide a constant picture of the Lord's relationship with His people - a shepherd's role with his sheep. Sheep are not animals, which can make it on their own. They are defenseless against predators and disease. They cannot provide for themselves what they need in order to maintain their lives. While many animals are equipped with the ability to fend for themselves, and survive the wilderness, not sheep; they are vulnerable. As one of our members in his 90s this past week while hearing the Gospel lesson commented on the sheep he tended in his youth on the farm in North Dakota: Sheep are stupid! We spiritually on our own are stupid and need tender shepherding. Sheep need nurturing oversight, which a loving shepherd can provide. The Levites would provide the tender loving shepherding of God's flock, His people, which would reflect the Good Shepherd's tender care.

Physically Israel had all its surrounding enemies defeated as we read: "the LORD gave them rest on every side just as He had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass." So what all of Israel now enjoyed as they took possession of their respective tribal lands, was reflected outside those forty-eight cities in those peaceful pastoral settings. The sheep could graze in the green pastures, tended near those still waters unmolested. So spiritually God provided the same for His people through the prescribed ceremonial laws including the sacrifices and through the proclamation of His life-giving word.

## II

Lutherans do not use the name "priest" any longer for the office of oversight, because the notion of a priest carries with it the

action of sacrificing. There was one sacrifice made once and for all, to which all the OT sacrifices pointed towards. Now that this sacrifice is complete, we no longer need any further sacrificing for our sins.

We heard in our Gospel lesson the loving voice of the Good Shepherd declaring: "I lay down My life down for the sheep." He expands a couple verses later: "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." Jesus, your Good Shepherd, willingly became the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, including all of yours. He willingly breathes His last breath on the cross to take upon Himself your death and then takes His first breath as your resurrected Good Shepherd in the tomb three days later. The Lord is Risen! **(He is risen indeed!)** Alleluia!

We now are served by the Good Shepherd, but somewhat indirectly, by those who we name, pastors. What is a synonym for "pastor"? – "shepherd". Those in this office are not the Good Shepherd, they cannot lay down their lives for the sheep, they need His sacrifice themselves. However, they will not do as the hired hand does and run away when the wolf shows up. No, the task of the Good Shepherd's pastor is to tend the flock in the green pastures where the sheep of Christ's flock gather unmolested, safe from all predators and tended so that no disease or injury will befall them and are fed well. Pastors guard against the wolf, who is disguised in sheep's clothing.

However when we observe that the Good Shepherd serves us somewhat indirectly we should understand that He is still here among us but in some very unique ways. His promise to us NT believers is that He is with us always until the very end of the age. He comes and dwells among us through His Word, wherever two or three of His sheep are gathered together in His name, there He is in the green pastures He provides for us. Doing what? – forgiving us our sins, bestowing life and conferring salvation upon us. When we are bathed in those gracious quiet waters we put Him on as a protective garment of righteousness. In our baptisms we are covered in His holiness, His eternal holiness. When we eat His body given and drink His blood shed, we are nurtured with these same blessings, again freely and safely in the green pastures.

Based on these precious pastoral scenes of God's gracious care of us His precious sheep and lambs in the OT and NT, make these words of Luther your same confession of faith reflecting Ps. 23: *"Because the Lord has taken me into His flock and provides me with His*

*pasture and care, that is, because He has richly given me His holy Word, He will not let me want anywhere. He will bless His Word so that it may be effective and bring forth fruit in me. He will also give me His Spirit, who will assist and comfort me in all temptations and distresses and will also make my heart safe and sure. My heart, therefore, will not doubt that I am my Lord's dear sheep and that He is my faithful Shepherd. He will treat me gently as His poor, weak sheep. He will strengthen my faith and provide me with other spiritual gifts; comfort me in all my troubles; hear me when I call upon Him; keep the wolf, that is, the devil, from being able to do me harm; and finally redeem me from all misfortune." (Table Talk, 1536)*

The picture of the Good Shepherd has been provided God's people from ancient times. He is not a cowboy, whip in hand, driving you where He desires you to go. No, He is your tender Shepherd who leads with His voice of life. Graze upon those plush green pastures dear flock of His possession. Be safe and well fed in Jesus' name. Amen.