

*We read as follows in Jesus' name:*

[Jesus said:] "I AM the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. ...

"I AM the Good Shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep....

"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." (ESV)

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen.* (John 17:17)

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

He is risen, He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Dearly beloved sheep of the Good Shepherd,

Roughly 600 years ago, one of the Lord's shepherds named John His was burned at the stake.

His crime was trying to reform some of the corruption in doctrine and practice of the Roman church.

Though he had been given promises of safe passage to and from his trial,

after the church authorities had condemned him as a heretic,

the magistrates reneged on their promises of safe passage and burned him as a heretic.

500 years ago today, on this date, a monk named Dr. Martin Luther stood before Charles V,

the Holy Roman Emperor, at the Diet of Worms

(basically a huge meeting to conduct the affairs of the empire in the city of Worms, Germany).

The pope had already condemned Luther and excommunicated him.

Now Luther was to stand trial before the civil authorities, who supported the pope.

He, too, had been promised safe passage to and from the trial, but he was aware of Hus' treatment.

He had no guarantee that this would end any differently for him.

Rather than being given an opportunity to defend himself or the doctrine that he taught,

at the trial, Luther was asked two questions:

1. Are these your books? (There was stack of some 25 books or so on the table.)

If Luther didn't recant, his condemnation as a heretic was certain & he would be considered an outlaw;

the gov't could execute him and any other citizen could catch or kill him.

This was in many ways a momentous occasion.

Luther's earthly life was certainly on the line.

As he reasoned out loud, if he recanted certain of those book, he would be denying Christian truths that even his adversaries had appreciated in time passed.

If he recanted others that spoke against the abuses and corruption happening in the Roman church

then he would basically be allowing such abuses and corruption to continue unchecked,

and more souls would be eternally lost on account of despair of God's forgiveness

or pride in their own righteousness.

So Luther answered:

*“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason..., I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted; my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand. God help me. Amen.”*

How courageous!?!?                      How foolish!?!?                      Which was it?  
Luther was basically laying down his life at this point.  
He could consider himself as good as dead.

But this isn't the way it's supposed to be, is it?  
What about the green pastures? The still waters? The table set in the presence of the enemy?  
What about goodness and mercy following me all the days of my life? And fearing no evil?  
These things sound so wonderful, but...  
Where was this Good Shepherd in Luther's day?  
Where is the Good Shepherd in our day?

Dear Sheep of our Good Shepherd's fold,  
Psalm 23 wasn't written to give us false dreams of an easy life here on earth.  
Jesus' declaration, **“I AM the Good Shepherd,”**  
isn't recorded so that you fantasize a life without difficulty here or now.  
Now that isn't to say that these and many other references to Jesus as our Shepherd  
isn't for our comfort. **THEY ARE!**  
But it is for our comfort, **ESPECIALLY** through difficult and hard times.

Think of the Psalm again,  
**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,**  
**I will fear no evil.**  
**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...**  
Listen to David acknowledge the existence of **evil** and **enemies**,  
while he walks through the **valley of the shadow of death.**

We certainly can know many of the difficulties that David had during his life,  
both before and after he became king of all Israel.  
We can know the difficulties that Luther faced, not only at Worms but throughout his life.  
You certainly know the difficulties you have in your life, & the sufferings other Christians face in theirs.  
And perhaps these conjure up doubts in you of the goodness of Jesus as your Good Shepherd.  
Maybe the fear of evil befalling you, whether by human hands, of disease, or demon, is debilitating.  
It could be that your love of a reputation in this world as a “reasonable person”  
at times overcomes your love of the Lord's unreasonableness in sending His Son for you,  
and so you shrink back from confessing Jesus' salvation.  
After all, they aren't the momentous occasions like Luther had at Worms.

But in reality, every time you confess or choose not to confess Jesus as your Lord is momentous.  
When we confess Jesus as our Savior, as opportunities arise in our lives  
among family and friends, and co-workers and acquaintances, and so on,  
these are momentous because they have the opportunity to hear their Good Shepherd call them

from despair of God's love or from pride in their own goodness.  
At the same time, when we shrink back from confessing Jesus as our Savior  
for fear of reprisal or loss of our reputation or job,  
then we have succumbed to the world's temptation.  
Instead of the Good Shepherd's voice going out, or binding up and healing the spiritually injured,  
we instead would stray from the paths of righteousness to follow our own path.

Such temptations are increasing more and more these days.

The world is trying to flex its frail muscles whenever you see someone canceled  
for not being "woke" enough.

Legislation called the "Equality Act" has passed the US House and is pending in the Senate  
that would make it a crime to call sexual immorality a sin,  
that would in effect put sanctions upon those who won't perform abortions or sex reassignments,  
or on institutions such as schools and colleges that continue to recognize the biological sexes  
as God created them as male and female and only male and female.<sup>1</sup>

Whether such legislation passes or not, you can be sure that increasingly,  
the Shepherd's sheep will be called upon to momentous occasions to confess Christ and His teaching  
or to recant and deny Him.

In such times, when you are called upon to confess or deny, whether it seems momentous or not,  
whether in just a one-on-one conversation with a friend, or before the court of law or public opinion,  
to rely on your own strength or character is dangerous to your faith and will always fail.  
It isn't what David relied upon, or what Martin Luther relied on.

Instead, they relied on the Good Shepherd and His voice, the Word of God;

This is the green pastures and the quiet waters.

Consider even the context in which Jesus said, "I AM the Good Shepherd."

Since chapter 7, Jesus had been butting heads with the chief priests and Pharisees.

They had sent guards to capture Jesus in the temple, but they came back empty handed  
because, in their own words, "**No one ever spoke like this man!**" John7:46

In chapter 8 Jesus told those Jewish leaders that they were of their father, the devil. John8:38

In chapter 9 Jesus healed a man who was born blind and rather than rejoicing for such a miracle,  
the Jewish leaders excommunicated the man for confessing Jesus to be from God.

Jesus later spoke to this man and confessed to being the Messiah, the Christ.

Some Pharisees standing by heard Jesus speaking to the man,  
and they challenged Jesus' claim that "**For judgment [He] came into this world,  
that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.**"

It is at this point that Jesus said, "**I AM the Good Shepherd...[that] lays down His life for the sheep.**

But did you not that: Listen to what the Good Shepherd does for the sheep:

He lays down His life for them... for you.

This was indeed THE momentous occasion. The moment when your life truly hung in the balance.

If Jesus had backed down here, if He had succumbed to the threats of the world,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://reporter.lcms.org/2021/lcms-presidents-statement-on-the-equality-act/>

you would have reason to despair of God's love and any hope of salvation.  
If Jesus had flexed His divine muscles in revenge or even hated those who crucified Him,  
you would have reason to fear, not merely the world's wrath, but the Father's wrath.  
But Jesus is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep,  
a perfect and pleasing sacrifice without spot or blemish.  
His righteousness, His holy fear, love, and trust in God above all things,  
is your strength in times of temptation.  
It is your confidence before the judgement seat of God.  
His blood, His death on the cross, is what covers over all your sins of fear, hatred, and doubt.  
Jesus does not cancel you because of your sin,  
but instead has canceled the judgment against you by having been canceled Himself on the cross.

But as He also taught, **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.**

If He has authority, not only to lay down His life, but even to take it up again,  
how much more does He have authority over the events in this world?

How much more does He have authority to protect you from those that seek you harm.

How much more does He have authority to raise you up, not only from worldly disgrace,  
but far more gloriously, from death.

This is why, **even though** you walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
you **will fear no evil**.

**For He is with** you as your Good Shepherd.

to bind up and restore you with forgiveness,

to gather and to lead by His Word of salvation & hope,

to feed, nourish & refresh you here, **preparing a table before you in the presence of your enemies...**

This is why the persecuted ancient Church celebrated the Lord's Supper every week,

to be strengthened by God's presence in His body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins.

500 years ago, Luther boldly confessed: *I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted;  
my conscience is captive to the word of God.*

*I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.*

He did not do this by his own strength or character, but implored the help of God.

It is by this Word of God, this declaration of the forgiveness of your sins

with the attending certainty of eternal life and salvation by which you stand here before God  
with a clean conscience.

Remember your Good Shepherd who laid down His life for you to take up your life in Himself.

May your life be filled with momentous occasions where Christ's death and resurrection  
are made evident in you through forgiveness and bold confessions.

The Lord preserve you and keep you steadfast in His Word, for

**Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!**

*Soli Deo Gloria*