

“The Shepherd’s Voice”

*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship,
to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).*

Fill in the blanks: “The Lord is my _____, I shall not _____.” Today, God reveals Himself through one of the oldest and most recognizable images in the Bible. As long as the church has existed, the picture of a shepherd has been used to tell us about God; to communicate information about the One who calls, and feeds, and cares for His sheep even at the cost of His own life. Next to the Lord’s Prayer, the words of Psalm 23 are the most well-known in all of Scripture. You proved it this morning. And yet, what does this ancient prayer of praise really mean for us? How does God shepherd His people today? Well, an important part of the answer to this question is found in today’s reading from the book of Acts. In this text, we find a very clear, practical picture of how God is our shepherd – both then and now.

In today’s first reading Luke tells us that following the miracle of Pentecost, the Church, “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). On the first Christian Pentecost, the city of Jerusalem was filled with Jews from all over the world who had come to celebrate this harvest festival. And it was in this crowded and festive atmosphere that the Holy Spirit filled the disciples, and Peter began to preach, and by the end of that day, about three thousand people were added to the Church. And do you know what Peter did in this powerful sermon? He preached Christ crucified and Christ risen and, even today, this message is the essence of the Church. *What was the Apostles’ teaching that rallied the early Christian church?* It was the message that Christ died for our sins and that God raised Jesus to life. And our faith is founded on these historical, objective facts about what God has done.

It almost seems too simple or too small a thing. How can this uncomplicated, unassuming, modest message actually make a difference in our lives? Our pride tells us that there must something else we need to search out; there must be some higher path; some greater insight; some cryptic key that will lead to a glorious new level of spiritual enlightenment. And this need to do something is nothing more than our sinful inclination to add to what Jesus has done; to save ourselves and take responsibility for our own standing before God. But the Lord has made a promise not a proposition, and we need to take Him at His Word – even if it looks worthless to the world.

Peter preached Christ crucified. And when the people heard his message they were “cut to the heart” and asked the apostles what they should do. And here, Peter again talked about God where God promised to be present. Peter said, “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” He didn’t send them on some grand spiritual safari designed to uncover hidden truths. He didn’t demand proof of their worthiness or a display of their deep theological insight. No, Peter simply said, “Repent and be baptized.” And in Peter’s Pentecost proclamation, they heard the voice of the Shepherd.

In Psalm 23, David praised God saying, “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul” (Psalm 23:2-3). And in the waters of Holy Baptism, God does exactly what He promised: He forgives...He fills...He leads...He liberates...He restores the soul. And in the “breaking of bread” God reveals Himself as One who comes to us and is present with us in the body and blood of His Son. And in Acts 2:42, Luke tells us that this is what the Church did: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

Don’t overlook this verse! These words are not merely a history lesson about an ancient church; rather in these words Luke describes the life of the Church today. The Apostle’s teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer: This is where God works! This is where God reveals Himself and His saving will. This is the completely unique function of the Church. *Here*, in the Apostles’ teaching and in the fellowship, and in the breaking of bread and in prayer our Good Shepherd leads us “in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” *Here*, “Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil, for God is with us.” *Here*, “He prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies and fills our cup to overflowing.” And because of what our Shepherd does here, “we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” We gather in worship to do what no one else in the world does...to proclaim that Jesus has come, and that He has shed His blood for the world’s sins, and that He has risen from the dead for the world’s salvation, and that He is constantly among us offering Himself for our eternal life.

In the Apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer we experience God...but the work of the Good Shepherd doesn’t stop here. You see, not only does God call, feed, defend, and care for us. The Good Shepherd also comes to the world, and He does this through *the Christ* embodied in *you*; through your love, through your forgiveness, and through your mercy and grace lived out in the real life, everyday opportunities God gives you to love your neighbor. Just as God reveals Himself through simple Word and Sacrament, He also reveals Himself to the world through the simple service you and I do for others. God feeds us, so we can feed others. God comforts us, so we can comfort others. God loves us, so we can love others. The center of our text describes this very thing as Luke writes, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (Acts 2:44-45).

These early believers weren’t driven by some utopian ideology. They were disciples who had joined themselves to Christ – not in some supernatural, esoteric, or unapproachable way – but these were people who had experienced the body of Christ in every way, and now, through their own physical bodies – in concrete, specific, and practical ways – they shared what Christ had given them with fellow sheep who desperately needed a Shepherd.

The Gospel had given them the freedom to do this; to love as Christ had loved them by giving up His life for them as their Good Shepherd; to serve their neighbor as Christ had served them. This was *then* and this is *now* the life of the Church, the Church outside the church building, the Church that serves others with Christ’s gifts embodied in you. And in your active, caring, and real expression of love, they hear the voice of the Shepherd and life begins anew. Go with the peace of this promise God has given you today in the voice of the Shepherd. Amen.

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