

**TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
MINOCQUA, WI
SERMON FOR APRIL 21 & 22, 2024**

¹¹ "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired man, who is not a shepherd, does not own the sheep. He sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep, and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ Because he works for money, he does not care about the sheep.

¹⁴ "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me ¹⁵ (just as the Father knows me and I know the Father). And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I also have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it up again. This is the commission I received from my Father."

(John 10:11-18 EHV)

Counting sheep. Does anyone really use that as a sleep remedy? Can't sleep, so count sheep until you do. Counting sheep is something a shepherd would do – a real shepherd – not some oversized modern fenced-in operation, but a real genuine Middle eastern shepherd and his flock. A shepherd whose livelihood is his flock, who lives with his sheep, protects them, knows them by name. A shepherd who after counting his hundred sheep and finding one missing, doesn't say, "Well I still have the 99," but leaves the 99 behind to go after the one lost sheep.

That's not good accountant/CPA math, it's not the kind of math that makes a profit, but it's Good Shepherd math. It's the kind of math we learn about here in God's house, in Bible study, in Trinity Lutheran School.

COUNTING SHEEP: THE GOOD SHEPHERD AT WORK.

"I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me." (v. 14) He knows you. Better than you know yourself. He knows your strengths, your weaknesses, your fears, your sins. He knows you the way a builder knows the house he built, the way an artist knows her latest creation. He doesn't just know who you are in a distant sort of way like we know many of our neighbors – see them, wave to them, know them but not really. He knows you personally, intimately, completely. He created you, redeemed you, and holds you in his loving arms even now.

And because he knows us so well, he knows that we are prone to wander. Sheep are helpless, high maintenance creatures – both the fluffy, wool-covered kind and the human flesh-covered kind. We'll drink from any polluted puddle that promises refreshment, we'll chew on the greenery from any pasture that looks tasty – religions, philosophies, the ever-evolving concept of spirituality, self-help fads. A favorite for us sheep is to think we can go it alone – that we don't need help, we don't need God, we can be our own god. This was the mistake of the first flock, the original sheep – Adam and Eve. Satan's OK with this inborn tendency of ours. Lone sheep are easy pickings for the wolves, for the Wolf.

Our sinful nature delights in stubbornness, in butting heads with each other, in asserting self rather than serving others. As independent as we think we are, sheep are followers. We're always following a leader, and if that leader isn't the Good Shepherd, we'll follow that false shepherd, that hired hand who cares nothing for the sheep to our own death and destruction. The prophet Isaiah said, ***"We all have gone astray like sheep. Each of us has turned to his own way, but the Lord has charged all our guilt to him."*** (Isaiah 53:6)

It isn't a compliment to be called a sheep. Spiritually speaking, without God, we're helpless, timid, weak, foolish, lost in sin and doubt and failure and despair. What can independent, self-sufficient, self-made, creative, in-control, take-charge types like us do about it? I've condensed everything that you and I can do about this into the next few seconds. Ready? (Silence) Did you hear? Nothing. Nothing at all.

Whether you're 4 or 44 or 104, left to our own we'd be lost sheep, dead sheep, devoured by the wolves running loose in the world. But here is the merciful heart of God, the Good Shepherd. He became one of us. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, the way a shepherd dwells among his flock. God didn't sit there on a throne in heaven somewhere saying, "They sure look lost; I hope they find me." The Lord, the Good Shepherd, joined the flock. **"I myself will shepherd my flock,"** (Ezekiel 34:15a) God said through the prophet Ezekiel.

God didn't leave shepherding His people to hired hands, who run off at the first sign of danger, For the hired hand, it's only a job, a paycheck. But the shepherd lives for the sheep/with the sheep, dies for them. **"I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."** (v. 11) In His death on the cross, He did just that. He laid down His life for a world of lost sheep. Our Shepherd shed his blood for every sin ever committed by every sheep who has ever lived, lives now, and will yet live. He is not willing to lose any to the wolves, to death and darkness forever. He's in the business of counting, claiming, keeping sheep.

These would be mere words, mere yada yada, peripheral piffle, if the Good Shepherd were still dead. You know, he meant well, great guy and all, but we're still waiting for him to, um, come back to life like he said he would. **"I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it up again. This is the commission I received from my Father."** (vv. 17b,18) Commission received, commission carried out – powerfully, gloriously, triumphantly on Easter morning.

You are sheep of the crucified and risen Good Shepherd. He pastures you in the green pastures of His Word; He leads you to the quiet waters of Baptism; He restores your soul, raising you from death to life in Him. He guides you in the paths of righteousness, the way of repentance, daily dying and rising, for His name's sake. Even though you walk every day through this dark valley of life called the "Shadow of Death," where threats to your life are all around you, where death and the grave loom large over you, you need fear no evil. Good Shepherd Jesus has gone ahead of you through suffering and death to resurrection and glory. Your Shepherd lives and in Him you live too. The grave couldn't hold Him, and it can't hold you either. And later in this chapter (John 10), Jesus says that he holds you in the palm of his hand.

We can count on Jesus to do what he will do as our Good Shepherd, and we will do what we are prone to do – which is "be sheep:" stray, wander, be weak and foolish. This is why Christian education is so important, remaining connected to Jesus by remaining in his Word in worship, and Bible study, and personal Bible reading. Here at Trinity, we believe this is so important that we have an entire school complete with faithful, well-trained, compassionate staff to shepherd the youngest among us. Christian education in all of its forms matters, because it connects us to Jesus, our Shepherd, our Savior.

A question for moms, dads, grandparents – Why does God give us the gift of children and other young people in our lives? What is his number one expectation of us? That we give them iPhones, that we save for their college expenses, that we take them hunting/fishing/camping, that we dress them in the latest fashion and keep up with current trends as the "cool" parents/grandparents, aunts/uncles, etc? God's #1 priority for us is this: that we give the children in our lives what they need above all else – Jesus.

And we give lip service to that. At baptism, we promise to bring up our children in the knowledge and faith of the Lord. Yep. Will do. Faith matters. Then why, parents, are we prone to providing and doing everything for our kids except tend to spiritual matters? Health, diet, school, extracurricular activities – sports, clubs, music, drama – saving for college. We encourage them to develop, to excel in everything but matters of faith, in knowing Jesus.

And we're ready with our excuses. We're tired, busy, stressed, there's just no time. Plus, church is actually kind of boring. The Word is, well, dull. Know what God says? "You're boring. You are so dull with your attitude and lack of gratitude, barely making time for the things that matter most."

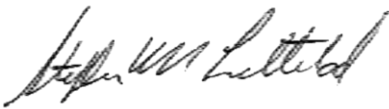
Here's the thing. No one, and I mean, no one, loves worries, and frets over your kids more than you, except for...Jesus. Except he doesn't worry or fret. No one loves your kids more than Jesus, the Good Shepherd, he

loves them even more than you do – he died for them. Parents, grandparents. Bring your kids to Jesus. For your own sake, but especially for theirs. Do everything in your power to ensure that you will see your kids/grandkids for all eternity. And how do you do that? Give them Jesus.

The Good Shepherd counts sheep. Which means you count to Jesus. You matter to him. He calls you by name, by your name (not “Hey you!) but... You are mine. You belong to me. I will never leave you or forsake you. Remember what I did for you in your Baptism. Enjoy the feast of forgiveness in this Holy Supper.

To borrow from Psalm 23, two more things you can be sure of/count on. Goodness and mercy will pursue you all the days of your life. There will never be a day that goes by – good or bad – when you are without forgiveness, when you are without your Shepherd’s. Not ever going to happen, from Jesus’ perspective. We may wander, but he finds us and brings us home. And finally, you can be sure of this: as sure and certain as Jesus died and rose again, baptized in the name of Jesus and trusting in him, you will live in the house of the Lord forever.

The Lord Jesus is your Good Shepherd. You lack nothing...ever.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Stephen Luchterhand". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

Pastor Stephen Luchterhand
Minocqua, WI