

## FOR THE LAMB IN THE MIDST OF THE THRONE WILL BE THEIR SHEPHERD.

Why no sheep? Why do schools and sports teams never choose sheep to be their mascot? We have mascots from all walks of life -- cowboys, warriors, packers, some team in Minnesota even named themselves after a raiding, barbaric horde. We have mascots from the animal world -- the bison, the bears, the hawks. These animals are chosen because they are sleek and strong, powerful and inspiring -- these are the qualities we respect and admire. But sheep? What is inspiring and motivating about sheep? The “fighting sheep”? Oh, please. The “grazing sheep”? Seriously! How about this one, the “cute, fuzzy sheep”? I don’t think so.

Let’s be honest, we don’t long to be sheep. We are not impressed with sheep. Sheep are stupid, dirty and ugly. Yet, Jesus teaches us that we are sheep, His little lambs. Today, we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday and we hear the Word of God, “For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd.”

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we focus our attention on the words of our Epistle lesson. Throughout this Easter season, we have said that the book of Revelation is an unveiling of Jesus Christ, where He is now and what He is doing for us until the day He comes again to judge the living and the dead. Our lesson gives us a most glorious picture of the saints at rest in heaven. This is the Church Triumphant. This most beautiful picture is given to us saints who still feebly struggle in the Church Militant. These

words comfort us that our home is in heaven and, there, we will rest from all our earthly struggles.

I. As John beholds the great multitude before the throne of God and the Lamb Jesus in heaven, the elder tells him, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation". "Great tribulation". That doesn't sound good and it's not good. We are sheep who must endure in the great tribulation of earthly life.

Great tribulation pretty well describes the world of sheep. Sheep cannot care for themselves. They must be led to food and water so that they can eat and drink what is good for them. Sheep left alone to fend for themselves will wander aimlessly; often falling into danger. And, when faced with danger, Sheep cannot defend themselves. In fact, when faced with eminent danger, sheep literally freeze -- they cannot move at all.

Great tribulation pretty well describes the world we live on this side of heaven. Your doctor speaks that dreadful word you don't want to hear, "cancer," "Alzheimer's," "Parkinson's". Your spouse once spoke the words "I do," but now, doesn't. Now, the voice of your child, which once spoke those cute, cooing noises, now only speaks the words, "I hate you," to you. The layoffs came, and day came that you received your notice. So, there you are, feeling alone, frightened to death.

And, you hear those wolves howling, don't you. Especially, those wolves who come in sheep's clothing, and howl, "go ahead everyone else is doing it;" that lady in the magazine, with her as your wife you would be happy; that new toy really would bring contentment to your heart, but you can't buy it because all your credit cards are already maxed out, from buying all those other toys that promised contentment. Your neighbor, the one you are supposed to love and live at peace with, ya right. There's no

living at peace, because their kid got to start, they got the promotion you deserved ... so there is only seething inside.

It should not surprise us that Jesus calls us sheep. Like sheep, we must be cared for, tended to. We need a shepherd.

II. The Good News of the Christian faith is that God gives us a shepherd, not just any shepherd, but His only-begotten Son to be our Shepherd.

For us and for our salvation, our Good Shepherd humbled Himself to become the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. That Lamb willingly allowed Himself to be nailed to the cross, to die upon that altar. Because we like sheep had gone astray, Jesus took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...[Jesus was] stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. [Jesus] was pierced for transgressions, [and] crushed for our iniquities, so that we would be forgiven (Is 53).

Jesus died for us, but “the third day He rose again.” Christ is risen! This is the joyous gladness of Easter. The grave has lost its sting.

Our Good Shepherd lives to say to us, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.”

In the new birth of our baptism, God the Holy Spirit makes us one with our Shepherd Christ in His death and His Easter resurrection, so that we become members of His flock, His Holy Christian Church. Here, His sheep find peace, safety, and comfort from the world. Here, He feeds His flock in the hearing of His Word and the eating and drinking of His life-giving body and blood, for it is in these means that His sheep hear His voice, and our faith is fed.

And we poor little lambs need that. In our first reading, Paul reminds

the Church at Ephesus,

“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.”

What was true for the Church in Ephesus is true for the Church in Beulah {Glen Ullin}. Fierce wolves attack us; tragically, they often wear sheep's clothing, so they look friendly and we want their friendship. That prowling lion, Satan, is set on destroying the Shepherd's flock, separating and scattering us from the tender love of our Good Shepherd. Amid such great danger, walking through the valley of the shadow of death, especially in times of trouble, sheep need their Shepherd.

The Christian faith gives us a sure and certain guarantee -- Jesus Christ is our Shepherd. He stands between His flock and Satan who desires to destroy each and every one of us. The Good Shepherd provides refuge for us in the pasture of His Holy Church. We have our Shepherd's own promise that absolutely nothing -- not even Satan nor death -- can take us from Him.

In His Word, Jesus gives us a picture of the green pastures and the still waters of heaven to comfort and cheer us in our daily struggles. These are the words of our epistle:

“Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will

be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

That beautiful picture of the Church Triumphant is, indeed, a foretaste of the feast to come. Jesus reigns in glory, and this most beautiful picture, is our guarantee that we shall reign in glory with Christ over all that brings tears to our eyes this day. What joy is ours to say, " I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."