

+ Today is called “Good Shepherd Sunday,” and the gospel reading from St. John has been in front of our eyes as a congregation over the last few weeks in a number of ways. A portion of this text is the assigned gospel for the Ordering of Priests, and Bp. Walter preached on it during my ordination service on Passion Sunday. Likewise, we’ve just concluded our study, on Wednesday evenings, of the “*I am*” sayings in John’s gospel, among which is included this sermon, during which Jesus announces, “I am the Good Shepherd.” For the sake of pleasant variety, this morning, I will focus my attention on St. Peter’s epistle, although it also directs our attention, ultimately, “to the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls.”

*This is thankworthy, if a man for conscience towards God endure grief, suffering wrongfully.* In or around the year 51 A.D., the Roman historian Suetonius records that, “since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus,” the Emperor Claudius expelled them from Rome. Later biblical and historical scholars have contended that the “Chrestus,” referred to by the Roman writer is actually “Christus,” that is, Christ, and that the disturbances which prompted the imperial edict were caused by the growth of Christianity within the Roman Jewish community. If so, this event would nicely provide the background for the writing of St. Peter’s first epistle. The letter is addressed to Christians whom St. Peter describes as “living as exiles of the Diaspora,” in modern-day Turkey, and he himself writes, along with St. Mark, from a place described as “Babylon,” which could, in the Christian code-speak of the day, refer to Rome. If this is, in fact, the historical context for the letter, we can understand it as a letter of encouragement to recently Christianized Roman Jews who have been deprived of their homes, forced to abandon much if not all of their property, and who have been forced to seek asylum with friends and relatives who dwelt in more friendly corners of the Empire.

These are people—fathers, mothers, and children—who are learning in a particularly sharp way the cost of discipleship. They have heard the good news—perhaps even from Peter himself—the story of God’s gracious and merciful self-sacrifice on the cross, and that redemption which has been accomplished for them in the shedding of His blood. But while they have gladly received the gospel of peace, i.e., of peace with God, there has been very little peace with and among men. The synagogue-community of Rome has split into pro- and anti-Christian parties. Sharp words, and probably more than words, have been exchanged—enough to attract the capricious disapproval of the imperial household. If the Christian Jews at Rome are anything like the other Christians in Acts, this was not their fault. The Rabbinic or Pharisaical party probably instigated rioting or some form of mob-justice against those of the way. Roman police get involved, and the Emperor, with a wave of his hand, not caring to distinguish between guilty and innocent, tells everyone to get out. Now, with their community destroyed, their businesses shuttered, the objects of bitter hatred by the other non-Christian Jews (see what you’ve got us into now?), and perhaps literally beaten and bloodied by their neighbors or “law enforcement,” these new Christians must now bundle together their most portable goods, make their way down the road to the port of Ostia, and set sail for an uncertain future in far-away cities. It would be

hard to blame them if, like the Jews of the Exodus in the desert, there might be a little grumbling: “Have you brought us out here to die?”

It's easy to trust in the Good Shepherd when your belly is full of green grass. Peter the Apostle now has to comfort and strengthen the flock when it appears as if they have been led astray and scattered by wolves. This will require a certain maturity in their faith—the necessity of which has suddenly been thrust upon them. *What glory is it, he writes to them, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? But if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.* St. Peter begins by reminding the exiles what every good Jew knows. Sin has consequences. Certain sinful patterns of behavior, in fact, seem naturally to bring with them certain inescapable results; for others, the judgment may seem to be held off for a time. The Christian Jews in Rome would have been familiar with the Proverbs of Solomon, in which the wise king observes: “My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord, neither be weary of his correction: For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; even as a father his son.” The Shepherd, in other words, must occasionally administer a timely whack with his crook, to keep the sheep in line, and this is for their own safety and benefit.

But there is something different going on with this Good Shepherd, something beyond discipline and correction. *I am known of mine, even as the Father knoweth me, and I know the Father, Jesus says, and I lay down my life for the sheep.* We've had occasion to note, in our Wednesday Bible study, that the image of the Shepherd and the Sheep was one that resonated with the Palestinian audience who heard Jesus preach. Indeed, it resonated widely in the ancient world, in which shepherding was a common reality across many cultures, from the wilds of northern Britain to the hills of Galilee. Christ as the Good Shepherd was, in fact, a very early artistic motif in the Roman Church, and can be seen painted on the walls of the catacombs to this day. But let's pause to consider for a moment: in this series of images, of the Good Shepherd and His flock, what happens to the flock, when the Shepherd lays down His life for them? What do they get? Perhaps out of a scrape for the moment, the cynic might say, but what now?

The gospel is that the Shepherd is not dead. He has laid down his life and has taken it up again. The wolf that He has defeated, in submitting to the shameful death on the cross and in rising from the dead, is not one among many, but all wolves—the Great Wolf, if you will; i.e., sin and death itself. The conquering of sin and death, however, has not brought about the end of suffering, or even the end of death in the flesh. It has, however, effected their transformation, and it is to this reality that St. Peter directs the attention of his audience. The forgiveness of sins has ended the old, disciplinary economy of the Law, and has brought with the reality of that forgiveness a deep vocation, a new economy of righteousness: *For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously, who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness.*

God Himself has conquered sin through joyful patience. We are healed, as St. Peter notes, quoting the prophet Isaiah, by his stripes. But He has laid down His life, not only to take it up again—not only to be a “super-Shepherd,” but even that the sheep may partake of that life. Life in the flock of Christ is not like life in other flocks. Those flocks are tended by hirelings. They exist for a time—when trouble comes, they break up. Their shepherds flee, the survivors scatter. The Jewish Christians to whom St. Peter writes are very probably, in their distress and misfortune, entertaining doubtful thoughts about the Good Shepherd and His sheep. Has our flock not been scattered? What will become of us? The Apostle reminds them that, by the power of His sacrifice, the Good Shepherd has made such a scattering impossible. And it is because having heard His voice, having known Him as the Father knows Him, the Sheep have been drawn into a mystical union and communion with the Shepherd and Bishop of their souls. “They will strike the Shepherd,” Christ prophesied to His disciples before the crucifixion, “and the sheep will be scattered.” His disciples abandoned Him, and Peter, with his loud denials, was at the forefront of the retreat. But Christ restored Him, and delivered Him three times, corresponding to his denials, the commandment: “feed my sheep.” Likewise, later in this epistle, St. Peter commands the elders from among the exiled Christians: “*Be shepherds to the flock that God has given you.*”

The Good Shepherd and Bishop of our souls has given His life to us, i.e., He has taken us to Himself, and given His body and His blood to be our food. Our pasture is in His invincible life. This life does not take from us, as it did not take from Him, the reality of suffering in this present life, but it does give us a share of His victory over that suffering. To follow the Good Shepherd is to become like Him and to be at home with Him, in that eternal pasture, wherever we may be in this present age, in which we live, as Peter says, as strangers and pilgrims. Let us continue to hear His voice, to rejoice in our knowledge of Him, but even more in His knowledge of us, whom He has called as sheep who had gone astray, and who leads and transforms us as brothers and sisters, the children of His heavenly city, and heirs of that life which is incorruptible, undefiled, and that does not fade away. + Amen.