

*11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own 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 have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."*

In my head I carry a picture. It hangs in the basement of St. John Lutheran Church, Union Corners and a thousand other places. In the foreground is Jesus, staff in hand, standing tall. Around him lambs and sheep are grazing, resting, looking. A quiet stream flows at his feet, a still pool of water nearby. Everywhere the grass is green, land gently rolling until in the distance majestic mountains frame this paradise. Above the sky is blue, fleecy clouds bright white scattered here and there.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.

For me as a child growing up in that small country church that picture was most appropriate. Week after week friends and family and neighbors all put on our Sunday best and gathered to sing the praises of our shepherd, and pray. We grazed from God's Holy word, were refreshed by the sacraments that flowed down to us, and there was peace.

Of course as a child I did not know about disagreements at council meetings, and arguments as the women gathered. I did not attend the funerals to see once smiling faces now streaked with tears. I was not in the pastor's study where adultery and brother angry with brother and mental illness were shared.

Nearly seventeen years ago I was ordained into the Christian ministry, and called to serve in my first parish. Through those seventeen years, I have carried the picture of Jesus, the shepherd, as the goal for the church. If everything were right, if we all believed, it would be like that. Our Lord would stand over us, and we would graze at peace, one flock gathered around one shepherd. Sometimes I have been angry with people, disgusted with them, bitter toward them when they have not shared in my picture and there has been discord, bickering, petty arguing, the sheep all in turmoil. In my perfect picture there is no room for any of that.

But this morning I would like to paint another picture for you. See the shepherd, staff held like a club, fighting off the wolves. And sheep foolishly wandering here and there, sometimes listening to the voice of their shepherd, often not. See wolves dressed in sheep's clothing, waiting for the moment that the shepherd will be too far away to help. See dark clouds, threatening clouds gathered overhead, see a barren desert everywhere but at the shepherd's side. See the shepherd devoured by the wolves so that the sheep might slip safely away together.

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.*

There is no peace in this picture Jesus paints, but wolves waiting to grasp the sheep, and the shepherd himself, giving his own life for the sheep. Everywhere there is threat, attack, but also the shepherd who knows his own and keeps them safe, who never flees when danger comes.

In all our lives we are torn between things as we hope they will be, as we want them to be or dream they will be and things as they are. Dreaming and hoping are the blocks out of which many brighter tomorrows are constructed, a student studies even when exhausted knowing that what he is learning is part of making a dream come true. A parent guides and trains a child day after day because that parent has a dream of what that child may become. A woman works long hours, doing more than is asked to gain the advancement she seeks. But the parent who has a dream for his child, must never love the dream more than the child.

Our God has a dream for his people: green grass, still waters, every soul restored. And God wants us to dream that dream with him. But we are not there now.

Now the wolves are attacking, and the sheep are wandering and if we are going to make it to green pastures and still waters we will need to stay close to our shepherd, and train our ears to hear and heed his voice. Someday there will be rest and everything will come easily but for now we must all be on guard. The wolves would like nothing better than to scatter the sheep, then feast on us one by one. But our Lord gathers us here, that he might be our safety.

Jesus is the good shepherd; he gave his life for you. He gave his life; the battle is to the death. All the believing and trusting in him that can possibly be in you will be required in this battle. But he promises that no wolf will have you for its own, if you stay near him. Sin and death and the devil will have no final claim on you because your shepherd knows you and will keep you.

Every Sunday he draws the sheep closer to himself, and feeds them. You must be here to hear God's word every week, or hear that word in other places of worship when you are not at home. Otherwise you may be lost.

Daily you must honestly look at your heart; whatever is false, and self-deceiving must be drowned through repentance, whatever harms you and your neighbor put to death, that you will not be lost.

In every moment of your living you must keep your eyes on your shepherd, never straying from him, that he may be your guide that you will not be lost.

The good shepherd will have his dream come true for you. He will bring you to green pastures, and still waters.

He laid down his own life for you..