

Mid-week Lent III
The Passion According to St. Luke: Gethsemane, Betrayal, and Arrest
St. Luke 22:31-62

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel had spoken against the shepherds of Israel and Judah. These men—prophets, priests, and kings—whom God had set up to lead His people, care for them, feed them with His Word were not seeing to the tasks to which He had sent them. So He declared woe upon them.

Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. (Ezekiel 34:2b-4)

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 23:1-2)

Because they had done this, God declared that He will be their shepherd. (cf. Ezekiel 34:23; Micah 5:2) In a stable outside the little town of Bethlehem, that Shepherd was born. Conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus is God-with-us, the Shepherd promised of old. He is the one who fulfilled the promise made through the prophet Ezekiel:

“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.” (Ezekiel 34:11-16)

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who feeds His people with the pure Word. He guards and protects them. He gives them everything they need to support this body and life. This you confess as you confess the Creed, speak the Lord’s Prayer, and recite the Ten Commandments and meanings. Jesus is and was everything the prophets, priests, and kings who came before never were and what those who come after Him never can be.

But it wasn’t just God’s coming in the flesh by which He accomplished this.

Jesus' life was one of hardship. You Christians have reaped the same rewards as He had for the kind of life He lived. He lived a life of perfect obedience to His own law. You bear His name upon your brow and heart; you are claimed by Him. He was mocked and scorned for His life. You are mocked and scorned for being His. He suffered and died as a result, you might say, of disrupting the religious status quo. You are constantly under the threat of death, and many of your brothers and sisters in Christ have given their lives for the confession of faith in Christ, even to this day. Your life as a Christian is hard for the sake of Jesus Christ; His life was immeasurably more difficult.

But His difficult life was one He endured willingly for you. You are a sheep, having been scattered, as it were, under the false pretenses of those who would teach you falsely about God and His Christ. Daily, you are bombarded with false messages of salvation from left and right, front and behind, in your minds and from those whom you encounter. It's enough to make one run away screaming in confusion and delusion. To what do you run? Perhaps it's the latest fad or something that makes you feel comfortable or relaxed. Perhaps you feel more comfortable just cowering in a corner. Whatever it is, off you go, running from Jesus.

His sheep still scatter. Jesus' life of hardship, suffering, and death for you resulted in the scattering of the sheep, too—this time, for all of the right reasons, not the false teaching of the deceitful shepherds of the past. After Jesus and the disciples had celebrated the Passover meal, they made their way to the Mount of Olives. Luke left this point out, but from there, they would all scatter. Mark wrote that Jesus even told them that they would be made to scatter.

The sheep would scatter because the Good Shepherd will be struck. "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered..." (Zechariah 13:7)

Sorrowful to the point of death—He was looking His own death squarely in the eyes—He went off to pray in solitude. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."

Who wouldn't sorrow over all that is going to happen, if you knew it was going to happen? I speak not merely of Christ's crucifixion, but of His entire Passion—the binding that will happen, the beating and being spat upon that will happen, and even the scattering of the sheep. It's enough to make a grown man cry. These things had to happen, though.

It's a symptom of this fallen nature. Imagine, if you will, being one of Jesus' disciple. Jesus is a pretty neat guy, if you get to know Him, learn from Him, and receive from Him. You wouldn't want Him bound, struck, and killed. You may even try to get in the way when He says that it will happen (cf. Matthew 16:22)—that it MUST happen. And even knowing that it will happen, when it does happen, in fright you scatter.

But these things had to happen, Jesus declared. And the hour had come. Judas, that wolf in sheep's clothing, arrived in the garden with the guard, and betrayed Jesus with a kiss. The guards laid their hands on Jesus and took Him. They bound Him and led Him to the chief priests and scribes to be put on trial. Along the way, they beat Him bloody. Not even on the cross yet, not even before the Praetorian guard yet, Jesus already shed His blood for you in His Passion.

It's a gruesome sight to behold, and it's only going to get worse. I sympathize with those who try to recreate Jesus' Passion and Crucifixion, who try to find a balance between portraying the violent death He endured and toning down that violence so that it can be watched. Only one production that I am aware of doesn't strike a balance, leaning more to one side, and it is violent in much the same way that Jesus endured violence. And if you watch it, you will be tempted to scatter your looks away. You can hardly bear to watch Jesus—even if just an actor—undergo the treatment that you for your sins deserve. One viewing is enough—more than enough, perhaps—for some.

And the disciples fled. "Then all the disciples left him and fled," Matthew wrote. (Matthew 26:56) According to Luke, only Peter followed him, and that at a distance. Were you there, you would have high tailed it away, too, fearful for your own life, frightened over what is happening to your teacher. Though you may have said like Peter, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death," you, too, would forsake Him, and even deny Him thrice before the rooster crowed.

But the Shepherd does not deny you. He has not, nor will He ever. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, not merely for being everything the shepherds of the past were not, but because, as Jesus put it, "I lay down my life for the sheep...The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:15, 11) Jesus, the Good Shepherd, must give His life for the sheep, for in His life given for them—for you—they have redemption, life, and forgiveness. No, this Good Shepherd doesn't deny you; though all would forsake Him and flee, He goes steadfastly to the cross...for all—for you.

The Good Shepherd doesn't deny you. Though all forsake Him and scatter, He still gathers those who believe in Him. His suffering and crucifixion are frightening and life-threatening events, even to this day, but Jesus has suffered and died for you, that you may be forgiven, and live as one of His own. It was on a dark, Good Friday, as Jesus was lifted up on a cross, that He drew all men to Himself. (cf. John 12:32)

"For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..." (Ezekiel 34:11-12, 16)

Though scattered, you are drawn to and into the Lord, Jesus Christ in His crucifixion, because you are covered in the blood that He shed there. On the cross, He sought you out, lost, driven away, broken, and sick—all sin—and He found you, brought you back, bound you up, and strengthened you, all by grace, without any worthiness or merit in you, all because of His fatherly, divine goodness and mercy. This speaks volumes about your God and His love for you.

And in order that you may be His own, He rose again from the dead that your place in eternity would be secure. Jesus lived, died, and lives again, and you are in Him so that in Him you live, die, and live again. Jesus gathers you back to Himself, who would, for myriad, selfish, sinful reasons, abandon, deny, and forsake Him—and His gathering you is accomplished by the forgiveness of your sins, which He won for you as He was struck and pierced on the tree of the cross. This is the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ for you.

Jesus was incarnate, was born, was betrayed, captured, and struck, was crucified, and was buried for you. His death for sin is your death to sin. The forgiveness He won on the cross as He spilled His blood covers your sin, even the sin of forsaking Him. To you, the blood of the Lamb was applied for life and you were declared righteous as you were washed in the water and the Word, and it is your daily sign and seal of a life redeemed and gathered from the scattering your Old Man prefers. For by that water, blood, and Word, you are the righteousness of God. You are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.