

Jesus is Our Great Shepherd
Hebrews 13:20-21
April 13, 2008

The other day I was watching a special on the NFL network about “one year wonders” in the National Football League. These are players that had one amazing year, got a big payday, and then disappeared into anonymity forever. The reason I bring this up is to ask the question, “How do we determine greatness.” The more I thought about it, I think it is time that determines greatness. If people are still talking about a person years later, then maybe we can label them as great. For example: There were a lot of great players that played in the days of Michael Jordan, but how many of them are still being talked about today? Michael Jordan wasn’t just good, he was great. The same is true about other figures in history, whether they be soldiers or politicians or something else. Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter which we traditionally celebrate as Good Shepherd Sunday. Undoubtedly you have heard sermons for years which taught you about how Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Today the writer to the Hebrews shows us that Jesus isn’t just the Good Shepherd, he is the Great Shepherd.

Shepherds played an important role in the agricultural society of Israel. Especially in Old Testament times they not only raised animals for food and clothing, they also raised animals that were used in the sacrifices. God often called on shepherds to switch from shepherding sheep to shepherding his people.

There were many shepherds in Israel who became God’s servants to shepherd his people. Think for a moment, how many shepherds can you think of that eventually shepherded people? Did you think of the obvious one from the Gospel lesson today? David rescued sheep from the bear and the lion, and now he was going to shepherd God’s people by rescuing them from the giant Goliath. Eventually he would shepherd God’s people by being their king. Moses was a shepherd for a while before he led God’s people out of Egypt. Amos was a shepherd before he became God’s prophet.

There are more examples, but we don’t have time for them all today. Besides at one time being a shepherd, what do all of these men have in common? They died. Moses died on the mountain and God buried him. Amos died. David died and as the apostle Peter preached at Pentecost, “Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day.”

The thing that makes Jesus our great shepherd is that he lives eternally. God told David, “When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” Jesus is the great Shepherd because he is the eternal Son of God. He came to rescue God’s people from the ferocity of sin. He did this as the key to the eternal covenant.

We hear a lot about covenants in the Bible. The writer to the Hebrews refers to this one as the “eternal” covenant. This is a promise that existed from eternity. This is a decision that God made in eternity to save the people of the world he was creating when they disobeyed him. This

is the covenant that God spoke to Adam and Eve in the garden when he said that he would send the offspring of the woman to crush the serpent's head. This is what God spoke of when he told Abraham that all peoples on earth would be blessed through a member of his family tree. This is what God spoke through Jeremiah when he said, "This is the covenant I will make with them at that time...I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more." This is the covenant that our Great Shepherd spoke of when he instituted his supper saying, "This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for you." He poured it out when he gave up his life for us. The greatest act that a shepherd could do is give up his life for his sheep and Jesus did.

But Jesus blood would have wasted in the dust at Calvary if he had not risen from the dead. God raised him from the dead, proving that sin had been paid for and the gates of heaven have been opened to us. The eternal Great Shepherd guarantees that we will live eternally with him in heaven. This covenant or promise is eternal. It never needs updating or changing. It is God's promise to us that we are saved.

Jesus is the Great Shepherd because he is still shepherding us today, as the writer to the Hebrews says, "Equipping us with everything good for doing his will." This is important because like a flock of sheep we have a tendency to go astray. The writer to the Hebrews addressed that tendency in chapter 13. He points out our tendency of being loveless toward one another. He reminds us of how we fall prey to sexual sins, sex outside of marriage, pornography, and the like. He reminds us about how we put the love of money ahead of our love for God. He addresses how we like to chase after religious ideas that we feel suit us better than what the Bible says. God is a consuming fire and will consume all those sheep who disobey him.

But our Great Shepherd gathers us back into the fold in repentance. He shows us our sins through his Word. We fall at his feet in sorrow, asking for his forgiveness. Our loving Shepherd takes us into his arms and forgives. What is our response to his great love? We desire to do God's will, to strive in thankful faith to keep God's holy commandments.

Notice how the writer puts it. First he says, "May God...equip you with everything good for doing his will." So it sounds like it is something that we do in response to God's love and he helps us. But then he says, "May he work in us what is pleasing to him." Now it sounds like God is doing what is pleasing to himself through us. What gives?

Doing God's will, keeping God's holy commandments, it sounds easy enough. It is not, we know that full well. We try...we fail. Our spirit is willing, but our flesh is weak. For each success there are many more failures. If we are going to live lives that reflect our thankfulness for the sacrifice of our Great Shepherd we are going to need some help. And that is where our Shepherd comes to our rescue again, equipping and working.

God, who planted faith in our heart through the Holy Spirit, also powers that faith through the same Spirit so that we can do what is pleasing to him. The faith that God demands of us he gives through the Word and the sacraments. The fruits of faith that God looks for on the tree he also grows through the same grace so that we are equipped and we do what is pleasing to God. Paul

said the same thing in Philippians, “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

What does this mean? When our girlfriend or boyfriend suggests that we move in together, we have the power to say no. When the coworker makes sexual advances, we have the power to say no. When that friend offers us drugs or suggests that we get drunk together, we have the power to say no. When that other person acts so loveless, we have the power to love. When money seeks to take over first place in our hearts, we have the power to push it back where it belongs.

Our Great Shepherd extends his staff over us every day of our lives. Through him we have protection from temptation and the power to live and act as sheep of his flock. Our Great Shepherd is truly Great to him be glory forever and ever. Amen.