Grace and peace are yours from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, amen.

The fourth Sunday of Easter reflects upon the image of Christ as our Good Shepherd; a theme that remains consistent in both the Old and New Testaments. We know the characteristics of the Good Shepherd: a protector, a friend, a loving Father, a loyal companion, an Advocate, and an ally. A Good Shepherd is an image of comfort, peace, and rest in knowing that the Shepherd comes between us and the elements of harm, sadness, grief, and loss.

There is more to this passage than first comes to mind as is connects several themes we have heard throughout Scripture. First, Jesus tells the righteous man (who refers to Him as Good Teacher), no one is good except for God. Jesus declares, I AM the Good Shepherd and reveals His identity with God. The Word of God recorded in Psalm 23 is, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” Jesus is the Living Word of God and declares the same words again, now in the ‘first person.’ I AM. Last week, our Gospel text ended with the words of Jesus where He tells His disciples; “the Law of Moses, the words of the Prophets, and the Psalms about me must be fulfilled.” And here is where Jesus fulfills the words of the 23rd Psalm by revealing Himself as our Good Shepherd.

A few other elements in the text that can be overlooked are the hired hand, the wolf, and the other sheep. Remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard; here is where Jesus refers to those who were ‘called and hired’ at the various hours of the day. The hired workers range from Moses, the Prophets, the Apostles, and others. Jesus makes it clear these were sent before Him and none of them are Him; none who came before are the Good Shepherd.

Next, we have the other sheep, in which Jesus is telling us that all belong to Him: He is the Good Shepherd to more that we can presently see (and possibly understand). My friends, Jesus is our Good Shepherd before we received the gift of faith, before we believed, and before our eyes were opened. He guided us with grace into faith and service to Him and to God’s glory alone. All human life has but one Good Shepherd and we trust in our Lord to bring us all to a place of rest, safety, and peace; to the pleasant green pastures and still waters.

Finally, we consider the wolf that Jesus refers to that scatters the flock. In general, the wolf is associated with the false prophets; a wolf in sheep’s clothing. The false prophets spoke what was pleasing to the people to deceive and draw them away from the Lord and His Commandments. It is the wolf who threatens the flock; those whom the Lord has called into service. The word ‘wolf’ is used one final time in the New Testament by Jesus as a warning to the Apostles. Jesus tells them after His departure [into heaven], fierce wolves will come among you, not sparing the flock.

So now we have what could be a challenge to our understanding of the shepherd, sheep, flock, and pleasant pastures. Are there truly dangers that exist and threaten us? Is there something that can harm us when our faith is weak and our strength is limited? My dear friends in Christ, the world will continue to attempt to deceive us, just as the false prophets drew the people of Israel away from God. We will be tested, tempted, and pushed to the limits of our faith; even to the point where we turn from what we know is right and pursue interests that we know are self-serving.

After all, this too is the Parable of the Sower being lived out around us. The seed was scattered, and some fell on the path, the rocky soil, among the thorns, and on good soil. Notice the word ‘Good Soil’, not a coincidence. What is good is from God and when the Word is sown in Good soil, there is an abundance. God makes us good through the salvation that comes only from His Son our Lord Jesus Christ.

To be scattered is also the parable of the Prodigal Son, the one who left to pursue life, see the world, and squander his inheritance. To be scattered is the exile of God’s people. To be scattered is the Tower of Babel. To be scattered is to go forth with an unknown purpose that results in our means to trust, rely, and depend upon our Good Shepherd for the comfort and safety we seek.

To bring all of this together is to add a few additional prophetic words that our Lord gives to us as the reassurance of our place in the pleasant pastures, still waters, and peaceful places. Where those have been scattered, God declares, “I will gather my people from all the places that I have scattered them, and I will bring them again to their folds.” It is the will of God that God is known to all His people. Just like the seed that is scattered on various soils, there is a time to learn, grow, and mature in the faith we have been given. We will certainly encounter rocky times and be torn by thorns that leave the wounds of the world upon us… after all, why should life for us be different than what our Lord endured?

The Lord *is* our Shepherd; our Good Shepherd we shall not want. It is ‘our wants’ that is the means by which we are scattered. We go searching for happiness, fame, glory, and wealth that come from what we can do for ourselves. The truth is, we never had to go anywhere to find peace; it was ours all along. But when we do wander; when we see others go wandering, we have the promise of God to gather us back into the fold of the Body of Christ in the world.

The Word of God through His Prophet Isaiah, “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6) “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” (Isaiah 65:25)

The Word of God is fulfilled, and Our Good Shepherd is with us; leading us through the valleys and trials of life; guiding us home to Paradise: a place of peace that passes all understanding to keep our hearts and minds though Jesus Christ our Saviour and Risen Lord. Amen.