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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/7/2017, for Easter 4A
1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was a boy reading my King James Bible, verse 25 in this morning's Epistle Lesson went like this:

For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned
unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls. (1 Peter 2:25,
KJV)

This old version speaks of the "Bishop" of our souls. Modern versions tend to speak of the "Guardian" of our souls. And so, the Revised Standard Version puts our verse this way:

²⁵For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned
to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1 Peter 2:25,
RSV)

Scholars says that either translation is correct – either "bishop" or "guardian" - because the underlying Greek word episkopos is a word rich and noble in meaning in the ancient world. For example, in Homer's *Iliad* my hero Hector was the episkopos of Troy.¹ He was "guardian" of the city. He guarded it with his life's blood until he was killed by the fierce Achilles.

But the word "bishop" is also a good translation of the Greek word episkopos. We detect that churchly meaning – bishop - in the name of one of the great church bodies here in the United States: the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church is a church with bishops – indeed, with bishops, we pray, in apostolic succession. In its churchly meaning, the episkopos is an elder or superintendent or overseer of a Christian church. Our Church Council here at Immanuel are episkopoi of our congregation. So am I. I am supposed to be an overseer of this congregation.

In this morning's Epistle reading, St. Peter says of his people that they were like sheep going astray but that now they have returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of their souls. He means, Jesus. St. Peter's people used to be straying sheep, which left them lost and confused and liable to be

¹ Barclay, William. *The Letters of James and Peter* (The New Daily Study Bible) (p. 250). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

destroyed. But now that they have come to faith in our resurrected Lord Jesus, they have found their way. They are on a good path, heading to green pastures by the still waters. They are under the care of the Good Shepherd and Bishop of their souls.

What I want to do in this morning's sermon is to try to reckon with the idea that the existence of the *Good Shepherd* implies that there are *bad* shepherds. I do not want to be such a one. Neither do you. We do not want to be bad shepherds in this world. There are thieves and robbers and hirelings and strangers, and they threaten the sheep, but we do not want to be among those bad shepherds.

So, this is a sermon about helping the people entrusted to us. Each of us is a shepherd to other people in this world. We shepherd others for good or for ill. My theme is simply that we are at our best when we are loyal and dutiful undershepherds to Jesus. He is the true Good Shepherd. But we can be his true and loyal undershepherds. Let it be so for us.

That there are bad shepherds in this world is a deep lament in the Bible. Israel's kings and priests were *supposed* to be shepherds of the people. They were supposed to guard the people, guide the people, even sacrifice for the people. That is what shepherds on the hillsides do: they guard, guide, and even risk death for their sheep. The shepherd boy David, for example, fought both lion and bear to protect his sheep. Israel's political and religious leaders were supposed to do the same. But too often they failed.

We read about those bad shepherds in the prophets. Isaiah, for example, speaks of the unworthiness of the nation's leaders:

The shepherds also have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain, one and all.
(Isaiah 56:11, RSV)

We find the same lament in Jeremiah:

¹"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" says the LORD. (Jeremiah 23:1, RSV)

Ezekiel continues the complaint:

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks? (Ezekiel 34:2, KJV)

In both Isaiah and Ezekiel, I think we can see what ails these bad shepherds: they care more about themselves than they do for their flock. They are preoccupied with their own notions – “their own way” - and their own gain. The bottom line is that they do not reflect the love of God for humanity. They do not reflect a good shepherd. And so the LORD swears that he himself is going to take charge and shepherd his people one day:

¹¹For thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. (Ezekiel 34:11, KJV)

We believe that that good day has come. It came on Easter morning. With the resurrection of Jesus, we now know who is the Good Shepherd and Guardian and Bishop of our souls. He is our Saviour Jesus.

And if we would be good shepherds of those entrusted to us, we must be like Jesus. If we would take good care of our people, we should come to resemble Jesus more and more. We cannot permit ourselves to be preoccupied with our own notions or our gain, but must lead our people in a Christ-like way.

Three things come to mind about Jesus as the Good Shepherd and therefore about you and me if we too would be good shepherds. First, we must be people of compassion for others. Second, we must guide others into abundant life. We must not misguide them into poverty of mind or soul or property, but into better life. And third, we must be willing to sacrifice for the sheep and lambs of our flock.

So, first: compassion. A great line about the compassion of Jesus is the one about sheep without a shepherd:

³⁶When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36, RSV)

Jesus pitied the people, and so, even when Jesus was weary, and even when he might have wished to withdraw for some rest, he nonetheless was moved with compassion toward the people and ministered to them (Matthew 14:14, for example).

So, think of the little ones in your care. Compared to the students in your classroom or Sunday School, you are wise and learned. They need to become wise and learned. Try to help them along. Pity what life will be like for them if you do not teach them.

And compared to the young worker, burdened with so much debt from college days... compared to that young worker, you might be seasoned and fairly stable. Show sympathy toward that young worker by being a good

shepherd to that one if you can. Open your mind and open your heart to the hopes and dreams and fears and uncertainties of those under your care.

Second, a good shepherd does not lead aimlessly, but rather guides the flock toward good pastures beside still waters. Bad shepherds are not always lazy. Sometimes they are energetically at work. It is just that they are not working well. They are leading their flocks, yes, but they are leading toward the cliff and toward the destruction of the souls of their people.

In order that we not lead aimlessly or dangerously, we need the Bible. I believe that in whatever area of life you serve, you can serve better if you will spend some time trying to increase in your knowledge and understanding of the Bible and praying for the Spirit of Christ to be strong within you. We have seen the prophets complained about political and religious leaders who neglected their people in favor of their own gain. They were energetic not for their sheep for themselves. But that is not what I am talking about in this second point. I am not talking about people who are greedy for their own gain. Rather, I am trying to lift up the virtue of truth — the virtue of leading others truly. If you have people under your authority in this city or in your home, then try to lead your little ones as the faith of the Bible teaches. Do not rely just upon popular opinion, but also upon the wisdom of the Bible.

And third, sometimes a good shepherd must be willing to suffer for the sake of the sheep. The days and the nights can be long and exhausting, but a good shepherd is willing to put up with some hard times for the sake of the flock. Likewise, in your world, with its many responsibilities, be willing to spend some sleepless nights, be open to brooding in the wee hours, trying to figure things out for the good of your people.

In general, Jesus says that he is not a thief or a robber. He does not to diminish life for the people around him, but to increase life. Indeed, he comes that his sheep and lambs might have life and have it more abundantly. So may it be for us too. In our labors and opportunities to help people along, let us try to make life richer and truer and more abundant for them, after the pattern of our Good Shepherd, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.