In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. (Psalm 23:1, KJV)

If you have been a member of this congregation for a good long time, then you might have known Muzz. Muzz was the grandmother of Christopher Schulze, who is our church sexton, one of our lectors, and in my mind, another member of the pastoral staff here at Immanuel, along with Parish Secretary Karen Rombey.

Now, Muzz was a person of strong Christian character, as you can well imagine. She was the mother of Chris’s mother, Margaret Schulze, and the wife of eminent theologian Richard Caemmerer Sr. -- longtime Professor of Homiletics at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis (1940-74).

I heard a story about Muzz recently that made me laugh, and Chris has given me permission to share it with you. It turns out that Muzz liked short prayers. But Chris’s father, our former pastor Raymond Schulze, liked long prayers. One day, when Ray was praying table grace, Muzz just couldn’t take it anymore and so she got up in the middle of the prayer and began taking the food back to the kitchen. I guess she figured the food would need to be reheated, the prayer seemed so long to her!

I was recently put in mind of this story when I turned to read Martin Luther’s exposition of our Psalm for this Sunday -- the beloved Twenty-third Psalm. The editor included this caption to Luther’s exposition:

Expounded One Evening after Grace at the Dinner Table
by Dr. Martin Luther
1536

Luther’s commentary then stretches on for twenty-eight pages. He talked and I guess a scribe jotted it all down. I bet the food needed to be reheated after that too!

Well, the Twenty-third Psalm is indeed very rich fare. I have often thought that there are whole sermons to be preached on each word of our text, the opening words to the Psalm: “The LORD is my shepherd.” Take each word in order and ponder it. You can find encouragement everywhere you look.

For example, Luther points out that the word “shepherd” is a very lovely word:

Scripture gives God many friendly names; but especially dear and charming is the one that the prophet gives God here in calling Him a Shepherd and saying, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” It is most comforting
when Scripture calls God our Refuge, our Strength, our Rock, our
Fortress, Shield, Hope, our Comfort, Savior, King, etc... It is
exceedingly comforting to know, however, that here and in other places
in Scripture He is frequently called a Shepherd. For in this single little
word “shepherd” there are gathered together in one almost all the good
and comforting things that we praise in God.

Luther then discusses shepherds and sheep as we find them in nature -- how a
sheep is “a poor, weak, simple little beast that can neither feed nor rule itself.” It
has a poor sense of direction and can hardly find its way back home, it has no
claws or big fierce teeth for fighting back, it seems unable to sense water or good
pasture, and it just doesn’t do well without a shepherd. And then Luther points out
that a good shepherd is like the one in our Gospel Lesson. He comes that the sheep
might live:

10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they
may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10, RSV)

This is one of my favorite Bible passages. It reminds us that when Jesus calls us to
follow him, he calls us to virtue and piety and, no doubt, some form of the cross
along the way. That is, we might have to suffer some simply to be true to Jesus.
And yet, in the back of our minds, we should remember that the virtues and the
sacrifices involved in walking with Jesus do not diminish life, but enlarge it. He
came that we might have life, “and have it abundantly.”

Luther says many fine things in his twenty-eight pages of suppertime
exposition, but I want to lift up just two of them. The first one is the question,
“Where might we find this Good Shepherd?” And the second one is the question,
“How do I know that I am included? How do I know that I am one of the very
sheep of the Good Shepherd?” This is a question about “predestination,” and it is
the chief thing I want to talk about this morning. But let me begin briefly with the
first question: “Where can I find this Good Shepherd?”

Luther has a firm conviction about where in the world this Good Shepherd can
be found. Answer: the Church. This is so because for Luther, the heart of the
Church is the Word of God. And for Luther, the Word of God is our true Shepherd
on earth:

For whenever God’s Word is preached properly and purely, it creates as
many good things and results as the prophet here gives it names. To
those that hear it diligently and seriously -- and they are the only ones
whom our Lord acknowledges as His sheep -- it is pleasant green grass,
a cool draught, by which the sheep of the Lord are satisfied and
refreshed. It keeps them in the paths of righteousness and preserves
them from suffering misfortune and harm. And it is to them an ever
happy life, in which food and drink and all kinds of joy and pleasure
abound. In other words: these sheep of the Lord are not only instructed and guided, refreshed, strengthened, and comforted by God’s Word; but they are also continuously kept on the right path, protected in body and soul in all kinds of distress, and finally they conquer and overcome all tribulation and sorrow…

Luther believed that because the Good Shepherd can be found in the Church, Christians should smile with satisfaction whenever they cross the threshold of the Church. And so, for example, when we come walking into our church building here at Lexington Avenue and 88th Street, Immanuel Lutheran Church, we should be pleased to think that we are drawing near to our Good Shepherd. Indeed, our carpet here at Immanuel is this rich red color, but Luther would have us imagine ourselves entering into “a pleasant green meadow” where we can find nourishment for our souls:

As often, therefore, as the Christian who belongs to a church in which God’s Word is taught enters this church, he should think of this psalm. With the prophet he should thank God with a happy heart for His ineffable grace in placing him, as His sheep, into a pleasant green meadow, where there is an abundance of precious grass and fresh water -- that is, for being enabled to be at a place where he can hear God’s Word, learn it, and draw from it rich comfort for both body and soul.

The second question Luther helps us with is this one: Am I, even I, part of this good flock, with this good Shepherd?” Here Luther provides an answer to a spiritual question that comes to torment many a conscience, especially after Luther. I am referring to John Calvin’s doctrine of “double predestination.” Predestination is certainly a Biblical teaching1. For example, St. Paul writes about predestination in Romans 8:

28 We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,

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1 *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Second Edition, 1974) points to some of the Biblical evidence: “Predestination is presupposed in the Gospels, e.g., Matthew 20:23, where the Lord tells the Apostles that the sitting on His right or left is reserved ‘for them for whom it hath been prepared of my Father’, and in John 10:29, where He tells the Jews that no one can snatch from Him the sheep given Him by the Father. The most explicit teaching in the New Testament is in St. Paul, esp. in the crucial text Romans 8:28-30, where the Apostle traces the process of the salvation of those ‘that are called according to His purpose’ from foreknowledge and predestination to vocation, justification, and glorification. The theme is resumed in Ephesians 1:3-14, where is added the factor of election (q.v.), inserted between foreknowledge and predestination. In the same text great stress is laid on the gratuity of it, ‘according to the good pleasure of His will.’ This is still more emphasized in 2 Timothy 1:9, where it is affirmed that God has called us ‘not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace.’”
in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. \( ^{30} \) And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30, RSV)

There are other passages like this throughout the New Testament, including the Gospels. So predestination is a real Biblical teaching. However, how to interpret this teaching has been debated in the church since St. Augustine. Calvin taught a particularly grim interpretation of the matter, in my judgment. Calvin taught that God makes a double choice for humanity -- a decision either for heaven or for hell. Furthermore, God makes that choice for each of us before we were even born, indeed before this world was even created. Some of us are among the elect. Some of us are among the lost.

As it turns out, this scheme is presupposed in the theology of many Americans -- even among people who have never studied John Calvin or even know his name. That is because of our Puritan ancestors, who were unrelenting Calvinists.

Still, for some of our most spiritually sensitive Christians, double predestination is a troubling teaching. It leaves them wondering why they should even try to be good in this world. It leaves them wondering whether their confessions are worthy and whether their penitential life is going to make any difference.

But Luther happens to address the question of election in his discussion of the 23rd Psalm:

“Yes,” you may say, “but how shall I know that the Lord is my Shepherd? I have not experienced that He is as friendly toward me as the psalm says; in fact, I have experienced the opposite. David was a holy prophet and a man dear and precious to God; so it was easy for him to speak of the matter and to believe what he spoke. But I cannot emulate him, for I am a poor sinner.”

Some of us might want to say “Amen!” to Luther here. King David, the traditional author of the Twenty-third Psalm, was a holy man, anointed with the Spirit of God, filled with grace, and beloved of God. It is easy to believe that the Lord is his Shepherd. But what about me, a poor, ordinary sinner? Is the Lord also my Shepherd?

Luther’s answer to that question -- a question concerning eternity for us -- is quite different from that of Calvin or the Puritans of colonial America. For the Puritans, they tended to examine their own souls or their level of material prosperity in this world, seeking for some clue as to their election. That is, to answer the question as to whether they were among the elect, they looked at themselves. Luther goes in a very different direction. Luther would have us stop looking, but rather listen! And he does not want us to listen to ourselves, but to Christ.
As Luther says, the chief virtue of the true sheep of the Good Shepherd is that they hear his voice and believe him.

Answer: I have shown above that in itself a sheep has chiefly this good attribute and fine virtue, that it knows the voice of its shepherd well and is guided more by its ears than its eyes. The same virtue Christ also praises in His sheep, when He says (John 10:4): “My sheep know My voice.” His voice, however, speaks thus (John 10:14, 15, 28): “I am the Good Shepherd … and lay down My life for My sheep…. And I give them eternal life. And they shall never perish, and no man shall snatch them out of My hand.” Give careful attention to this voice and be guided by it. If you do, then firmly believe that you are Christ’s sheep and that He is your Shepherd, who knows you well and is also able to call you by your name. But when you have Him as your Shepherd, you will surely not want. Yes, you already have what you shall have—eternal life. Nor will you ever perish. Nor shall any power be so great and mighty that it could snatch you out of His hand. Of that you can be sure. For this Shepherd’s voice will surely not lead you astray. What more could you want?

The sheep of our Lord’s fold hear his tender words, and believe them. They credit his promises. They do not accuse Jesus of being a liar. Luther means to take Jesus at his word and therefore to trust his promises of salvation. And so he can defy sin, death, and the devil: Let the wolves, he says, “boil or roast me, it shall be my comfort that my Shepherd has given His life for me.”

But if you ignore this voice and are guided by what your eyes see and your old Adam feels, then you will lose the faith and the confidence that you ought, as a sheep, to have in Him as your Shepherd...Such strange thoughts and many others will come to you if you fail to heed His voice and Word. But if you hold fast to them, you will be tempted neither by the devil’s wile, the world’s disfavor and raging, nor by your own weakness and unworthiness. You will go straight forward to speak freely: “Let the devil, the world, or my own conscience oppose me as violently as they may. I will not for that reason grieve myself to death. It must be so and it shall be so, that whoever is the Lord’s sheep will surely be assailed by the wolves. Be it with me as it may, let them boil or roast me, it shall be my comfort that my Shepherd has given His life for me. Moreover, He has a sweet, kind voice, with which He comforts me and says that I shall never perish, neither shall any man snatch me out of His hand; I shall have eternal life (John 10:28). And He will keep this promise, no matter what happens to me. If because of my weakness some sin or other fault by chance is still found in me, He will not reject me on that account. For He is a friendly Shepherd, who watches over
the weak sheep, binds up their wounds, and heals them. And so that I may be all the more sure and not doubt, He has given me, as a token, His holy Sacraments.”

And so it is that Luther has what could be called a “sacramental understanding” of predestination. He certainly believes that God ordains people to salvation. And Luther can point to when he does it: he does it as often as the Gospel is proclaimed in Word and Sacrament. When you were baptized, God ordained you to salvation -- not in virtue of your merits or saintliness, but in virtue of his love. When you come to the Holy Communion this morning, Jesus will remind you once again that he has chosen you for salvation -- again, not because of your merits but because he gave his body and his blood for you that you might have life.

This determination of destiny by way of God’s Word is the basis of the Church’s outreach and missionary work. Our good God is willing to choose for his kingdom as many folks as we can bring to his Word. So, let’s bring them!

In this old world of ours, there might be some people who never have a fair chance to hear the Gospel. I believe we can confidently entrust them to the mercy of God. But for those we can reach, let’s do what we can to fetch them to Christ. Perhaps the conduct of our life out there in the world, perhaps our attempt to be “little Christs” in the world, will help draw others to the Church. Maybe, when the time is right, we can give our testimony to Christ and thereby draw someone to him.

It is a strange and wondrous thing, the Word of God. Here we are, coming to church on a Sunday morning like other Sunday mornings, and we find that the adventure of Christ is meant for us! It is meant for each of us, one by one. As surely as you are hearing my words, as surely as your receive the Blessed Sacrament in your hands, you are thereby declared a true sheep of the Good Shepherd’s flock. All of the comfort of the Gospel is meant for you. All the beauty of God’s Law, all the beauty of holiness is meant for you. Have no doubt, then, that you are part of the flock of the Good Shepherd, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.