

It's the picture of mom that everyone loves. She's sitting in the rocker in the nursery, baby freshly washed, wrapped up and resting in the safety of mom's arms, feeding, giggling, napping.

We know this is such a small portion of what being a mom looks like. More often than not it's chaos, juggling diapers and food and tummy time and everything else that comes with being mom, but when Huggies or Pampers wants to sell you the newest diapers, this is the picture they drive their ad home with. "Buy our diapers and you'll have some quiet." And when naïve none-parents imagine what having a newborn is like, this is what comes to mind. And when sleep-deprived parents day dream, imaging a life that could be, this is what they wish for.

Baby safe and fed and content, at peace because she or he knows that mom can respond to every need, to every cry.

This is the care we want to give to our kids, and receive from our parents. This is the care that our Good Shepherd promises to give.

The Shepherd, says Jesus, knows His sheep. He knows their needs, their weaknesses, their foibles. Their wandering is no surprise to Him, nor are the threats that stalk them as they graze. Their shepherd knows them so well that He's able to promise not simply protection through their days but ensures that He can grant eternal life, that nothing, that no danger can wrestle them out of the Shepherd's hands.

And this Shepherd has risen from the dead, He has taken His own life back after laying it down, giving authority to His words. He makes no empty promise that you are safe from the threats of the devil; He has proven that death is no match for Him, so you, His sheep, need not worry about your last breath, when and how it will come. And certainly His hands are strong enough to persevere through your toughest days.

This perfect care is what we want from our parents, it's what we want to give to the next generation, and it's offered, free of charge in Christ our Shepherd.

So why is received by so few? Why do so many deny it or despise it?

It's because they do not believe, plain and simple.

Which is not so unreasonable, if you think about it. Why would people take the word of a Church that preaches a message passed down for thousands of years? The people of Jesus' day, though they drank the wine come from the water jugs, they had the bread on the mountain side, and I bet every person knew a person who knew a person who knew someone that Jesus healed, yet they still couldn't quite grasp that Jesus was so special, so different, that He was the Christ prophesied to come. For your neighbours to believe these signs after the stories have been passed down, for them to believe them as truth rather than myth, it's important that we can empathize and understand why it's a challenge for them to have faith as you and I do.

After all, even we who are sheep, who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Saviour, the King and Good Shepherd, we doubt through our days.

Rather than trusting our shepherd to grant us daily bread, we stress and we strive to amass enough for our life of daily breads. Even though we have His protection we guard our hearts and dread what could be around every corner. Even though our saviour promises to welcome us in by the merits of Christ, through the open arms of a crucified and risen Saviour, we still try to prove our worth to God and neighbour by being good enough, by working hard enough, by showing that we aren't too far gone.

Christ's sheep and the rest of the masses participate in the exact same faults, and follow after their own hearts to get lost in dark, unknown corners surrounded by shifting, faceless dangers. The only definitive difference between "us" and "them" is that we believe, and even then, we don't believe because we had more rationality to see Jesus as the right answer, as if we solved "the puzzle" or because we had more spiritual eyes to understand that Jesus is the Christ, the saviour, the Shepherd leading to life. We believe because God had mercy through someone else to teach us again and again of what our Good Shepherd gives.

Someone preached the Word to us, that we would know that our efforts won't appease God, our determination won't make life endure, and all these idols speak only empty promises, but the crucified Christ, risen from the dead, He's able to dwell with us all our days, leading us, speaking comfort to us, and ultimately carrying us through this pilgrimage through the valley of the shadow of death. This persistent word, warning that the little gods we turn to will fail us as they lead us away from the flock, and teaching us that the true God never will forsake us.

This is what makes sheeps out of goats; we see this is Jesus' will because even to those who couldn't grasp His identity, He still had more signs to do that they might believe the salvation that was in their midst. Maybe Lazarus' resurrection and His own might break through their hearts yet. And even if they couldn't believe while He walked among them, the Church was sent to all, even the Jews that rejected Christ, even to those that crucified Him, that they would receive mercy and welcome. He wanted them to be a part of His flock, He wants *them* to be a part of His flock, so He kept preaching His word that they would believe.

And this Word is also what keeps sheeps sheep.

In fact, this is the first thing Jesus says sheep do. They believe, so therefore they must have heard, but it's not just a one time believing and listening but a continual hearing. Sheep listen to their shepherd. They hear His calling, His invitation, His warning, His soothing words as the skies thunder, as He sheers then, even as He mends broken bones and many wounds. This constant reassurance of His care reminds them that He knows them and it's safe to follow even when danger is near.

So sheep, be sheep! Church, be church. Hear the Word of God today and forevermore.

Your shepherd laid down His life for you and took it up once again that you would know that neither cancer nor Covid nor the oldest of ages nor accidents nor lightening nor thieves in the night nor the unknown around every corner could harm you, even if they bring your last breath.

And His innocent blood was shed so your sin need not weigh down your conscience. Yes, you are weak against temptation, and even on the best of days you lose too many battles against sin, yet your shepherd is not counting down the tries you have left to finally live out that perfect day. Your sin is paid for and you are no longer its slave. In its place you have Christ's righteousness that you would stand perfect before the Father and you would have His strength to live out some love to your nosy neighbours, your frustrating family, even passing strangers on the street.

This is your shepherd, one with the Father. He knows you and is holding you so close so neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights nor depths, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We know this is true because look at the masses in Revelation, the unending crowds before the throne, singing His praises day and night. They are there only because our God was faithful to shepherd them through all their days and even through their death.

Do you want to stay a sheep, or even today do you want to become a sheep, following this perfect shepherd to life everlasting? Hear of His care that you may trust it, day in and day out, until at last He calls you home. He who calls you is faithful; your shepherd will surely do it.

Amen.