

# “The Lord is My Shepherd”

Galatians 2:15-21; 3:10-14

Last week I told you how this year in our lectionary series of readings, we will read Galatians six weeks in a row and almost read the entire letter. Which is really wonderful, because Paul’s letter to the Galatians is a beautiful message of Christ justifying us, declaring us not guilty, by grace through faith, apart from the works of the Law.

The Law brings to you the reality of sin and curse. Paul says, “for all who rely on works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’”

There is no way to try and be righteous before God. The Law always condemns. It always points its finger and says, “You are a poor, miserable sinner who deserves death and hell.” If you think that you can be right with God because you are a “good” person compared to your neighbors, St. Paul would like to have a word with you. You cannot be justified by works of the Law, but only through faith in Jesus Christ. The righteous shall live by faith.

This week in Vacation Bible School, I changed jobs. I was not the puppet/storyteller person. Truth be told, I am still suffering from puppet-elbow from last year. So, I got to take part in the Bible Challenge. I really enjoyed doing that. The kids had the challenge of discovering the words of Scripture for the day.

There were five backpacks each with one or two sheets of paper with a word or up to three words on them. One at a time, they would hang the papers on a clothesline. When they first put up the words, they were simply making blind guesses. The portion of Scripture which was our focus was the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Of course, some of the words were put up and they had it right, but they didn't know why they had it right, and they didn't really know whether or not it was right until it was revealed to them.

This is an important distinction. Vaguely talking about God, or using your own imagination, or making blind guesses at what God might be is not the same as looking to the written Word.

Out in the greater culture, people talk about Jesus all the time. I would safely say that the majority of what I hear about Jesus is not the Jesus found in the written Word. If you are talking about what is seen on TV or on the Internet, it is rare to see the Son of God as He presents Himself in the written Word.

He is not simply some great moral teacher. He is not simply some leader of a peace movement or champion of social justice. When we start guessing about who God is, we tend to make Him into the God that we want Him to be, or we make Him into an idealized version of ourselves.

There is a common refrain among Christians that we want to “be like Jesus” – a lofty goal indeed. When confronted with situations, people commonly ask the question, “What would Jesus do?” If you are going to ask that, you must remember that flipping over tables and driving people out of the place of worship with a whip is an option. Oh, but that isn’t the Jesus we want to think about. We like the painting of the smiling Jesus with the lamb on His shoulders – which is accurate.

But that image does not capture the fullness of Jesus as St. Paul speaks about Him. Who is the Jesus of whom St. Paul speaks? He is the One who became a curse for us, who carried all the ugliness of our sin to the tree of the cross. This is the Jesus of the classic Renaissance paintings with the crucified and dead Son of God gushing water and blood from His pierced side – with angels catching it in bowls or in a chalice or in their hands. (There are numerous paintings that depict this image) That is the Jesus of the written Word. That is the Jesus who appeared to St. Paul on the road to Damascus.

That is the image of the Son of God in whom we can place our faith. There is no guess-work about Jesus when you see Him hanging on a cross. That sacrifice on the altar of the cross is the only reason you are justified in the eyes of our Father in heaven. It certainly was not through your works of the Law. No one is justified by the works of the Law.

This is a point we tried to emphasize during VBS week. The theme for the first day was Jesus is the Good Shepherd. We also dealt with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm each day, in addition to other Bible stories. The image of Jesus as our Shepherd is so appropriate. The sheep do not have to work for food or protection. “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters.”

He doesn't ask my opinion on how things should be. He knows what is best for me. He keeps me from real danger even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This is not the sort of promise you will receive by doing all the things written in the Book of the Law. You have been saved by the mercy and forgiveness of God who sent His Son to die under the Law, so that you can live under the grace and eternal protection of your Good Shepherd. Amen.