

Sermon by Pastor Michael Price on May 11, 2025

at Christus Victor Lutheran Church in Columbia, SC

Transcript by L. Scott Johnson

Dear friends in Christ, sisters and brothers,

I bring greetings from God, greetings of grace and mercy and peace, and these gifts already belong to you and to me because they come from Jesus Christ, amen.

This is a Sunday that is typically called *Good Shepherd Sunday*, and it gives off this image of this kind of pastoral shepherd Jesus holding little lambs in his arms, but there's something different going on in these readings today that demonstrate another kind of image of a shepherd, of what God is for us, and it has to do with the fact that Jesus stands in the portico of Solomon at the dedication of the temple, or the Festival of the Dedication that takes place in Jerusalem. What we now know as Hanukkah in the Jewish calendar. But there is something going on about this image of the shepherd that is juxtaposed, not just..., it's not just standing on its own, but rather it is an image that is juxtaposed to the image of a temple. And when we consider what the image of a temple is, it's much like the building that we sit in right now. It has walls, it has roof, and it has candles. It has a place where we dedicate ourselves to the presence and the love and the mercy of God. We gather around what God's promises are. There's a space that is set apart and set aside for worship and gathering and studying and singing and praying. It's a place where we gather our prayers, we offer our sacrifices to the Lord. It's a building.

Jesus presents himself as shepherd. And a building, so far as I know, I can't think of any places where a building begins to uproot itself out of its foundations and starts tromping around the world. It doesn't. The nature of a building is that it stays in one place. And the good shepherd is the one that journeys with. It is the one that is mobile. It is the one that is found in many places.

Throughout the whole history and narrative of the Bible, this juxtaposition of a God more stationary and a God more mobile is constantly at odds with each other. From the very beginning, the very people whom God covenanted with to travel with them by means of the Ark of the Covenant located in a tent that can be taken up and taken down very easily, can encamp itself with the people and journey with them through the wilderness. Suddenly there is a desire to build a house of oak. And God says, "Don't build me a house, I build you a house."

It continues on where it appears as if the prophets are speaking of a God that is going to be made known outside of the usual bounds and boundaries of where the people have defined where God is supposed to be.

It is a constant juxtaposition of a stationary God, a God that doesn't really move, and a God that absolutely can't help but to move, to travel, to be in many places. This juxtaposition oftentimes theologically, I think, is rectified by a certain kind of general idea that God is everywhere, and this is true.

But that is a theological point that is very hard earned in the narrative of Holy Scripture. It isn't just simply assumed that God is everywhere, it is a process and a narrative of this clash of two theological points. Is God stationary? Is God found only in one spot? Is God concentrated only in one area? Or

will God be found outside of the boundaries? Will God be found outside of the building? Will God be found outside of where I thought the lines were drawn?

Good Shepherd Sunday is meant to be a time where we listen to Jesus' promises that He is a shepherd and will care and protect even these promises that He makes to those who doubt Him. He says, "All those who follow me know my voice, and they will never be snatched out of my hand." And indeed, they'll never be snatched out of the Father's hand. It is a promise that the Good Shepherd never leaves. That if you were to say that the Good Shepherd puts His temple within your own heart, that the Good Shepherd plants Himself there and never leaves. But as far as our lived life and our experienced life, the Shepherd is the one who is on the move.

This very familiar psalm, Psalm 23, ends with a phrase that we often know, "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." The word itself isn't just a sort of, you know, a light-hearted follow. It is a pursuit. It is a chase. This is love and mercy that comes from God that tirelessly and relentlessly pursues. That is the promise at the end of that psalm.

In fact, what wins out in the story of the Holy Scriptures, the Scriptures as we know them and as we've received them from our ancestors in faith, is that the God who is on the move is the God who is made known in Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. In fact, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is that final declaration that God simply will not be confined. That God will be found wherever your feet take you. The Book of Acts, which is our first reading today¹, we hear a story about Peter showing up to Lydda, a community of people being led by a disciple, Tabitha, also known as Dorcas. Please keep the snickering down. Apparently it's a Greek name².

But there's something about this miracle that Peter performs, this miracle that almost..., by the way that the story goes, it almost feels commonplace. It's like the miracle of resurrection doesn't have that pizzazz and astonishment that often accompanies a lot of stories like this, even the ones that Jesus was a part of. You get the sense that Peter presents Tabitha as alive, but this miracle..., it's almost as if something about this miracle, there's something more going on than the miracle itself, see?

And I think it's paired nicely with the Good Shepherd promises of Jesus. Because this miracle was a simple outcome of Peter and others simply paying attention to where their feet take them. They listened to the movings and promptings of God to go where their feet will take them and to pay attention to the people around them. And because Peter did this, because Peter listened to God, and because Peter listened to his neighbor, and as he was presented with all of these meaningful things that Tabitha had done for her community, all these ways that she had led and served in the city of Lydda. Laura and I were having a discussion as to how the heck you pronounce it. We don't know. Somebody might know out there. Don't correct me right now. You'll see me after, I guess. But when the disciples are presented with this one disciple's difference-making in that community, then what happens next almost feels like, well, this is what ought to happen.

Because on Good Shepherd Sunday, it is important to remember the promises that Jesus makes as our shepherd, but also what this image really means. This image really means a Christ who will not stay stationary, where there is nowhere where you will go, where Christ will not find you, where God's presence will not be made manifest and made known. The promise of the image of Christ as shepherd is juxtaposed with the temple because Jesus' own people are about to experience historically what it means to go without a temple and the crisis of faith that ensues because of it.

1 Acts 9:36-43

2 Dorcas and Tabitha are respectively the Greek and Aramaic words for gazelle.

Christ himself becomes the embodiment of what it means to trust in God who is indeed mobile, and who has always been, even when a temple is constructed, mobile, on the loose, free, out there, pursuing you and the one being pursued.

It gives a certain dynamism.

A dynamism oftentimes that our faith is wantingly lacking. Wantingly? Wantonly, right? Does anybody know? Scott will tell me afterwards, right, Scott? Scott will tell me afterwards.³

But our faith lacks this good news of God being on the move. And so we celebrate this promise. As a church, we gather around a table of Christ's very presence. We gather around this table because Christ's presence is guaranteed here, not because Christ is confined, but because Christ has promised to be here. And by gathering around a sacrament, a sacrament of Christ's true presence, we then are sent out into a world to know that Christ is not confined, not temple-ized, but rather a shepherd, a shepherd that moves, wanders, pursues.

Church, open your eyes. Pay attention. Pay attention to where your feet and your car tires take you. Pay attention to the people around you.

Christ is loose.

Amen.

3 "Wanting", meaning "lacking": "A dynamism oftentimes that our faith is wanting."