

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER "GOOD SHEPHERD" SUNDAY

May 2/3, 2009

History tells us that in 1845 a Texas pioneer by the name of Sam Maverick accepted a herd of some 400 cattle as payment for a debt he was owed. He put those 400 cattle on his 400,000 acre ranch where they were, by and large, neglected and allowed to run free. When calves were born, they were left unbranded and often were appropriated by neighboring ranchers who branded them with their own brand. And even though ownership was often disputed there was, in the end, no recourse for Sam Maverick because a brand was the legal mark of ownership. It was this that gave us the term "maverick" which means a wild, unbranded animal found straying and easily taken by another.

In the end, this story is not only the story of mavericks as animals but mavericks as people as well. Isaiah wrote, "We all like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way." And it's true. While under God's ownership in the beginning, for after all He created us, humanity soon strayed away and became "mavericks", deceived by Satan, the world, and even themselves. They were like mavericks without a shepherd. And the rest of history, at least as it tells of man's wanderings, is really the story of people straying from God.

But thanks be to God, He would not simply let us go and so, at the very point where we began to stray, that is, at the very point when Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying God, God promised to send One who would not only atone for sin but return us and all who would believe in that One to His fold once again. He promised to send a Shepherd, a "good shepherd" who would not only seek and find the lost but one who would literally lay down his very life so that the lost might be saved. That promised One, that Shepherd, is, of course, none other than Jesus Christ, the very Son of God and the Savior of the world. It was for the very purpose of seeking and saving the lost that he came into this world. It is, as Jesus said himself in Luke 19 when he came to the home of a man named Zaccheus and was received by him through faith, "Today salvation has come to this house ... for the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

And what was true two thousand years ago is still true today. Jesus has come to seek and to save us too. Now, some of us were sought and saved when we were but infants and our parents brought us to Christ in Holy Baptism. Others of us were sought and saved at an older age – perhaps after years and years of wandering and straying and being lost. And perhaps still others of us are still wandering, still straying, still lost. Well the Good News this day is that this Jesus came to save us all, to claim us for our rightful owner, to change us, if you will, from mavericks into being the sheep of God's own fold, branded in His name through our baptism into Him, the "Good Shepherd".

Without him we would still be lost, dead in our sins and without hope. But with him we are found, alive through the forgiveness of our sins and filled with faith, hope and love that comes from God alone. And as the Good Shepherd, He calls us to follow him no matter what.. Now, for most of us following Jesus when things are going well in our lives is not too difficult. When we are healthy, when we're making enough to pay our bills and maybe even have a little left over, when all is well in our marriage and in our family and among our friends, when people like us and we have all the things we think we need to be happy, then we follow although at times like this we may be tempted to forget the one we're following too. But when things go bad, when we're ill, or when we're unable to make ends meet, when we have problems in our marriage and in our family, when people turn against us and we're feeling sorry for ourselves, when we are called to sacrifice for the sake of Christ and the Gospel, then it can be a different story. Where is our Good Shepherd now, we may ask. Right where I've always been, he answers – walking before you to lead the way, walking beside you to strengthen you, walking behind you to encourage you and walking within you so that you might not stumble or fall.

It's at those very times when the going gets tough that we need to remember the way Jesus went for us so many years ago – willingly and completely – so that we might be God's own once again. Often times suffering, especially suffering that comes because we are God's own, is a vehicle through which we may grow closer to God, by which we may follow him more closely, listen more intently and love him more dearly.

It's not unlike the famous story of "Footprints in the sand." Remember that story? It seems that one night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Scenes from his life flashed across the sky and he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand; one belonging to him and the other to the Lord. When the last scene of his life had flashed before him he recalled that at the lowest and saddest times of his life there was only one set of footprints. Dismayed he asked, "Lord, you said that once I followed you, you'd walk with me all the way. Why, at the troublesome times of my life; the times I needed you most, would you leave me?" The Lord replied, "My precious, precious child. During your times of trial and suffering when you saw only one set of footprints – that was when I carried you."

You see, the Jesus who, like a good shepherd, sought and saved us, who laid down his life for us, whose resurrection from the dead we continue to celebrate throughout this season, is the very same Jesus who seeks to be our Good Shepherd in good times and in bad. He lives and because he lives we shall live also. And as he speaks to us again today through Word and Spirit, we are called to hear his voice and to follow him through it all.

May he enable us to do just that this coming week for his name's sake. Amen.