

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Easter

Gustaf Wingren

John 10:11–16 · 1985

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Ålidhem Church, Umeå

Text: John 10:11–16

We are going to speak of the good shepherd.

We have an idyllic and somewhat sweet picture of the shepherd in biblical times. Perhaps we got that picture from pretty prints. The shepherd's work was hard, and it was dangerous. The shepherd worked alone, often far away, since good pasture lay far away. He had to risk his life when hungry wolves attacked the flock. Thefts of sheep were not unusual, and the robbers were sometimes armed when they turned up in the wilderness. The shepherd had to reckon with falling in battle, like a soldier.

Jesus was a shepherd in that way. When he sets out with the disciples from the table of the Lord's Supper in the night of Maundy Thursday, he says, "Tonight you will all fall away because of me. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'" (Matthew 26:31). It is a quotation from a brutal and hard-to-understand passage in the prophet Zechariah (13:7).

It is of this shepherd that we shall speak today. And every word we say about him is gospel. There are five points that are important, and each point is treated in the hymn we shall soon sing, Swedish Hymnal 119, by Frans Michael Franzén, a hymn that has exactly five stanzas. Please open the hymnal and follow along.

First, we are always under care when we live with Jesus, the shepherd. We too easily fit judgment and wrath into the picture of God, so that "God" becomes a frightening word. And it is true that there is something frightening in today's text about the shepherd — but it does not lie in the shepherd. It lies in the wolf. We live under threat all our lives, the threat of sickness, the threat of evil, the threat of death. But — "in the short while I walk here, what do I fear and

complain of? He who is the good Shepherd guides my steps,” wherever I go. Death and the terrors that come are the wolf. But into this darkness Jesus speaks to us in his word as a shepherd speaks, this voice that gives coolness and calm in anguish.

Second, we are not punished when we go astray. One might imagine that a shepherd who has to search for a lamb that has run away would be angry with this unruly lamb when he finds it lost. But that is not how it is. The parable of the sheep that ran away says, “When he finds it, he lays it on his shoulders with joy” (Luke 15:5). We have gone wrong many times. There really are falls into sin in our lives. And yet we live now with Jesus, with the Shepherd who does not abandon us because of our faults:

*“He seeks the one who goes astray;
the weak one he takes in his arms;
he raises up those who fall.”*

That is what the Shepherd does with us when we do wrong.

The third point concerns suffering, grief, and adversity, the things that shatter joy, silence all laughter, put out the glint of light in the eye, and rob us of our courage for life. Perhaps that is the greatest lack of all among us Christians today, the absence of courage for life. We find it so hard to draw on the immense resources that lie in faith, this faith in Christ that does not lessen when things become hard but grows in strength, since it is grounded in a catastrophe that is a victory, the death on the cross. This too is in Franzén’s hymn 119, in the third stanza:

*“However dark my way among the thorns,
if only I do not turn from his track,
I shall not lose courage.”*

So far the hymn (119) has spoken mostly of me as an individual: “I walk here,” “I hear his voice,” “however dark my way.” But in the text, John 10, it speaks of a flock of sheep, of many, of a fellowship that the Shepherd wants to keep together. When we go astray, it is not away from the Shepherd that we go, not at once. No, we think we can keep our faith in Jesus on our own: the life of the congregation is so lifeless and unfruitful. Yes, that is how it happens when lambs run away from the flock. It is not interesting enough — one can make so many

interesting excursions. And so one has lost the Shepherd. One has lost the only one who gives life. That is the fourth point, the cry for him:

*“O you who said, ‘No one can
take my own from me,’
to you I cry against a world
that would draw me from you.
Let me not be led astray from those
whom you have promised to guide
to your Father’s blessed home.”*

When the text speaks of “sheep that do not belong to this fold,” that is, that do not belong to the old Israel, it means all those congregations out around the Mediterranean, the church of “many peoples,” the great congregation that would come into being when the gospel was preached in the world, “one flock and one shepherd.” It was the conviction of the earliest Christian congregation that Jesus’ death on the cross at Golgotha was the gate through which Jesus went into a new life. That life came to all who were trampled down and burdened with guilt, in the gospel, in forgiveness, in the resurrection out of darkness. And so it has in fact turned out.

As a day passes, as the earth turns once around and sunlight falls on new parts of the globe, it never happens — not even for five minutes — that the sun has to shine on a part of the world where the gospel is lacking. Everywhere the day is greeted by people who receive it “in Jesus’ name,” in the Our Father. There are “different folds,” but “one flock and one shepherd.”

The hard word we began with, the word Jesus takes from Zechariah, “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered,” the word that points to Golgotha, to death, is really a word about the resurrection — Easter, this life that Jesus wins for us by his death on the cross. And that shepherd’s word too is in the great Easter hymn, 102, also by Franzén: “Come, scattered flock, back to your shepherd again. He lives, he lives, and he follows you still.” Frans Mikael Franzén is the most lovable of all our hymn writers, this “babbling child,” as Tegnér — a little disparagingly — called him. It is a joy for Umeå, I suppose, that he was bishop here too.

In those days Umeå belonged to the diocese of Härnösand, and in Härnösand Franzén lived the last years of his life.

And now, fifth, we have come to the day that all of us are going to meet. “Soon comes the night when each of us shall depart from here” — this line from the Swedish hymnal Dag Hammarskjöld quotes again and again in his *Markings*. During an important and difficult period of his life he writes this line in his diary every New Year’s Day: “Soon comes the night ...” Death could come unexpectedly. He knew that. And it did come unexpectedly — for us, that is — in September 1961. He himself knew it could come at any time. That is why he wrote that line every New Year’s Day: “Soon comes the night ...”

This night, the night of death, becomes a day instead. It becomes a morning with dawning light. That the darkness we go into in death is light is hard to believe. Sometimes the certainty lives in us, sometimes it goes out. Then no beautiful words from Franzén or from Hammarskjöld help. Only Jesus reaches into our heart, he who says, “No one who believes in me shall remain in darkness” (John 12:46).

Let us pray.

Almighty God, you care for each one of us as if you cared for him alone, and you care for all as if we were only one. You are the God of the world. You sent Jesus into the poverty and distress of this world. Let no one be lost. Hear our prayer. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Translator’s notes. The heading reads “den 21/4 1985,” that is, 21 April 1985. The hymn stanzas are from Frans Michael Franzén’s “Den korta stund jag vandrar här” (Swedish Hymnal 119 in the 1937 book) and from his Easter hymn 102; they are translated for sense, not as verse. Wingren spells the poet’s name both “Michael” and “Mikael,” and we have kept both. The typescript has “Och ändå lever vi nu, men Jesus” where “med Jesus” (“with Jesus”) is clearly meant, and we translate accordingly. The sentence “Att det är mörker som vi i döden går in i är Ljus” is a little tangled in the typescript and is rendered for its plain sense. The capitals used for stress (“VARGEN,” “ENDE”) are not reproduced.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·