

## **JESUS CHRIST IS OUR GOOD SHEPHERD.**

Easter 4 – Good Shepherd – Confirmation – April 19/22, 2018

**Psalm 23.** <sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. <sup>2</sup>He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, <sup>3</sup>he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. <sup>4</sup>Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. <sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. <sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Dear Christian Friends:

It's our 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In anniversary years, some churches publish a list of all the confirmations in their history. Our history is too long for that. But guess how many youth confirmations Saint John's has had since the year two thousand? Well, in the last eighteen years, not including this weekend's confirmation class, Saint John's has confirmed eighty-five youth. That's an average of four point seven (4.7) confirmations a year.

But let's look at those numbers from a different angle. Of those eighty-five confirmands, how many still attend worship at St. John's? To make that list, you have to come to church at least once a month. That's not setting the bar very high. So, how many of those eighty-five still attend church here faithfully? Any guesses? Eleven. Eleven out of eighty-five; thirteen percent.

Now, it's true. Some of our confirmands have transferred to other churches. I hope they attend their new church faithfully. But I doubt it. Whether here, or at any other church, statistics show that the majority of confirmands do not remain true to their confirmation vows. Most of them have stopped worshipping the Lord.

This is not just a problem for Pastor Reckzin or for Saint John's. The same, dismal statistics plague our Wisconsin Synod and most Christian churches in

America. Far too many young members stop coming to church. They let their faith fade. They give up on God.

That is discouraging. It can make us say, “Why even bother with catechism class and confirmation? If only ten to fifteen percent of our confirmands still come to church, the system must be broken. So, maybe we should postpone confirmation until these kids are more mature. Or maybe we should set the bar higher for confirmation. We have to do something so that these young believers stay loyal to Jesus.”

Well, there is a noble sentiment in those words. We do want all our members to remain faithful to Jesus and His Church. However, in those sentiments there lurks a spiritual problem. That problem exists deep in the sinful nature of every loyal, dedicated, regular faithful member of the church. It’s the thought that says, “Why do so many people fall away from church? I mean, I haven’t fallen away. I still come to church. I still love Jesus. I still give my offerings. I still care about my salvation. I still care about my church. So, what’s the problem with all those other people? They promised to be faithful to Jesus. But they have thrown away their love and devotion to Jesus. What is their problem?”

Well, their problem is sin. As sinners they are powerless to stand up to Satan. Satan targets recently confirmed Christians like a roaring lion attacks the weakest members of a wildebeest herd on the Serengeti. And every new confirmand faces the temptations of an increasingly sinful world. Peer pressure pushes our young members into being ashamed of their faith. Their new found “wisdom” in young adulthood makes Christianity seem, at best, a quaint waste of time, and, at worst, a repressive system that strangles their intellect. And then there is just plain laziness, insincerity, materialism, selfishness, a blatant disrespect for God, and simply not caring about the salvation of their souls.

That’s just a short list of temptations that face every person who has ever stood at the front of this altar and vowed, “I will be faithful to Christ, even to the point of death.” Did you catch that? Those temptations to fall away from the faith face every single Christian. That means you. That means me.

So, if you and I face the same temptations that tear so many people away from Christ, why are you and I still loyal to Christ? Why do you and I still come to church and worship God? Why do you and I still care about the salvation of our eternal souls? Well, I can tell you why not.

It's not because you are any better than those eighty-seven percent who stopped coming to church. You do not have a soul a little less infected with sin than those fallen-away members. You do not own a better nature purer and holier and more spiritual than theirs. No, every single human being has the same damnable nature of sin, disobedience, and disloyalty.

So, why are you and I still here at God's house, receiving God's Word and sacrament, and enjoying God's blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation? And what hope do Shawna and Erika have as they make their confirmation vows this weekend? Well, Psalm twenty-three gives us all the hope, all the comfort, and all the protection we need to remain loyal to Christ.

The twenty-third Psalm says, **Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.** That valley of the shadow of death is more than just the physical death we all die because of sin. That darkness also includes the spiritual death that comes from falling away from the Lord.

But why hasn't your faith died? And why do we have confident hope for Erika and Shawna and every future confirmand at Saint John's? Well, our confidence comes because **JESUS CHRIST IS OUR GOOD SHEPHERD.**

Now, a shepherd's job is to lead the sheep, feed the sheep, and to defend the sheep. But a shepherd's job is also to keep the flock together. That's important because sheep are stupid. Sheep are easily distracted. Sheep love to wander away from the flock.

The same is true with you and me and every other person who has ever been confirmed. We are spiritually stupid. We think we have a lot more spiritual strength than we actually do. We are easily distracted away from Christ. All the activities, pleasures, and commitments of daily life pull us away from Jesus like a shop-vac swallows up a speck of dust. We all love to wander

away from the flock of the Christian church like a—well, like a sheep would wander off a cliff unless the shepherd kept his watchful eye on his flock.

That's why you are still here in Christ's flock. **JESUS CHRIST IS OUR GOOD SHEPHERD.** And like every good shepherd does, Jesus feeds his flock. Psalm twenty-three says, **The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.** Jesus feeds your faith and keeps it strong by resting your soul in the green pastures of his promises of love and forgiveness. Jesus leads you to the still waters of your baptism where he washes away all your sins. He assures you of your place in his flock forever.

And, like every good shepherd leads his flock, Jesus also guides you. **He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.** With his Holy Scriptures Jesus gives you the wisdom of God—a wisdom that is wider and longer and higher and deeper than any human thought can ever conceive. Jesus guides you in righteous paths—a way of holiness and purity that can only come from a pure and holy God.

And, like every good shepherd brings his flock safely home every night, Jesus will bring you safely home. **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

So, it is because of Christ and Christ alone. It is because of his love, his power, his guidance, and his protection that you and I are still here in this flock of the Christian Church. It is by God's grace and love in Christ, that we commit Erika and Shawna to the loving protection of Jesus Christ, their Good Shepherd. Yes, the glory, the thanks, and the praise belong to Christ alone. The peace, the joy, and the salvation belong to you and me because of Christ and Christ alone. Praise God for that! AMEN.