

Stray Sheep
Isaiah 53:6
4th Wednesday in Lent
March 6, 2013

Do you know any stray sheep? Stray sheep are people who deviate from what is considered to be the accepted path. Stray sheep tend to chose paths in life that go counter to their contemporaries. They spend most of their time swimming upstream. Being a stray sheep can be a good thing or a bad thing. Let's consider an example of each.

Martin Luther was a stray sheep both in his family and in the church. Luther's father expected Martin to be a lawyer, which is what he was studying to be when God called him into service. Luther's entrance into the monastery made him the family stray sheep.

Luther also became a stray sheep in the Catholic church, when the Holy Spirit revealed to him that salvation comes by grace and grace alone. The Catholic church had a much different view of salvation, so Luther became a stray sheep of the established church. Of course, we're glad Luther did the things he did. Being a stray sheep isn't always a bad thing.

Then, there is the downside of being a stray sheep. A famous stray sheep, which we should all be familiar with, is the son in the parable of the Prodigal Son. This young man had plans for his life, but they didn't include running the family farm. His counter-cultural actions took him from demanding his inheritance early; to squandering his fortune on wine, women, song; to tending pigs for a living. Even though the story has a happy ending, that happy ending didn't come from the son's stray sheephood. The happy ending came from his father's grace.

Now, let's consider the words of our text: *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all* (Is 53:6 NIV). Does that sound accurate? Look around at today's society, both in America and around the world. Look at our own community. Look at our own lives.

There are no exceptions, all of us must confess that, at one time or another, we have been like the Israelites of Isaiah's time. In the book of Judges, we find a very accurate description of not only the people of Isaiah's time but also the people of today: *Everyone did [what was] right in his own eyes* (Judges 21:25 NKJV).

In America we value individualism, freedom, and pluralism, sometimes even to the point of unrestricted autonomy and anarchy. Instead of emphasizing common values, our mutual dependence on each other, and the universal and absolute standards of right and wrong according to God's Law, we prize our right to go our own way. The battle cry of our post-modern generation is, "There is no absolute right and wrong. Whatever I believe to be right is right for me."

As a result, in some ways, we are like a flock of sheep with no shepherd. We all stray off as we pursue our own agendas. Instead of sticking together as one flock united by common bonds and a common commitment to follow the same path, we scatter ourselves over the hills as we each seek our own greener pastures. Greener pastures of right and wrong. Greener pastures of our individual concepts of God.

Judged by God's Law, each of us is a stray sheep. We find ourselves wandering around in life. Instead of following Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, we turn away. In the end, we find ourselves stranded on the edge of a cliff; we may even fall prey to the hungry wolf.

At the beginning of this message, I gave you two examples of stray sheep. Here's another example of a stray sheep. Jesus was a stray sheep, though in a very different sense from us. Jesus didn't conform to the expectations of his contemporaries. The people of his time had certain ideas about how the Messiah was supposed to act and what the King of the Jews was to accomplish.

However, their unrealistic expectations didn't affect Jesus' chosen path. Jesus paid no attention to human traditions and expectations. Instead, He chose to follow the will of his Father – and he did so without ever straying from it. He chose a path in life which no one else had ever taken. He fulfilled the prophecy of our text.

Many of Jesus' contemporaries thought of him as a stray sheep. In the book of Matthew, Jesus is called: *a friend of tax collectors and sinners* (Mt 11:19 NIV). In the book of Mark, another accusation is brought against Jesus: *Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming!* (Mk 2:7 NIV). And, when the church leaders brought Jesus before Pilate, they said: *We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king* (Lk 23:2 NIV).

But Jesus was, in reality, the sinless, unblemished, perfect Lamb of God. God the Son became one of us – a perfect sheep to be sacrificed for our salvation. Whoever heard of a shepherd who humbled himself to become a sheep – beyond that, a sheep who was born destined for slaughter?

Yet that is what Jesus Christ did. He took the form of a servant and was obedient to death. Listen as Paul describes Christ's stray sheephood: *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!* (Phil 2:6-8 NIV).

The Good Shepherd became the sacrificial lamb – the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. As our text says: *The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all* (Is 53:6 NIV).

In the first chapter of his book, Isaiah prophesied: *Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool* (Is 1:18 NIV). In God's eyes, that's the kind of sheep we are right now. We are no longer blemished,

stained sheep – the kind of sheep God declared to be unacceptable for sacrifice in the Old Testament.

Rather, our wool has been washed clean, spotless, white as snow. God considers us to be like the Lamb of God Himself – the sinless, unblemished, perfect Lamb of God. We are scrubbed spotless by Jesus, cleansed by his blood, adorned with his righteousness.

At one time or another, we all have wandered around in life. St Peter tells us: *For you [all] were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls* (1 Pet 2:25 NIV). But we didn't find our way back on our own. Jesus has led us into the fold of his salvation.

Our Good Shepherd calls to us by name and leads us through life toward heaven's pasture. When we recognize and respond to his voice, he leads us in the paths of righteousness for the sake of his name. He brings us to green pastures and restores our souls. Now we have purpose and direction for our lives, as we follow the Lamb of God, who has taken away the sin of the world.