

1 Peter 2

Good Shepherd Sunday is a beautiful Sunday where we hear of God's provision and care.

But to be honest, it's not all fluff and cutesie little lambs.

As you know, the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and we as the sheep, has some law in it – it says something about us: We are sheep. Which is to say we are stubborn, short sighted, defenseless, dumb, wandering, and if left to ourselves we are dead. Quite the compliment, no?

But we know this, you've heard it before, and how true it is if we are self aware enough to see it.

Yet I'm afraid that there is more bad news this morning. It seems like a dirty trick too.

Imagine being given a gift. A nice box, with a bow on it. "Why thank you, how exciting!" And you open it and it is a rotten banana peel. It's rancid meat with maggots and flies. It's a rat that jumps out at you. What a cruel thing, no? Surely anyone who gives a gift like that is a psycho.

Well, Peter says that we have a gift. He says it's a "gracious thing." Grace is gift language. Grace is undeserved goodness, again, a gift.

So what is in this wonderful box, from God, this beautiful gift with a bow on it – lets get excited! “It is a gracious thing, when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering...”

“Umm, Lord, Good Shepherd, could I have something else than sorrow and suffering?”

Now, I should be more charitable to the text. Strictly speaking the gift is the ability to endure the suffering, not the suffering itself. Which is a difference, isn't it? So, in this sense we can say the gift, again, isn't suffering but strength, endurance, steadfastness. And those are certainly nicer things aren't they? But I still can't help but think, “Lord, it sure would be nicer if you would just take the suffering away.”

And now we are into the conversation of how God didn't make evil, it is the absence of his goodness, come to a world that pushed him away. We are in the conversation of how God is still omnipotent, controls all things, and so, while he doesn't delight in evil, nor is it his immediate will for evil to happen, we do see that he will use evil for his purposes. To test, to strengthen, to punish, or, to accomplish his good will and make known his truth and goodness.

And when you get handed a nice beautiful box of suffering, with a bow on it, it may be quite hard for you to determine which of those things it is. But, back around now, you are a sheep. You can't see over the hedgerow and know if wolves

are there or not. You're too focused on the grass 2 inches in front of you to see the stormclouds building on the horizon. You're too stubborn to leave your patch of grass when anyone else knows the best thing for you to do is move your fluffy tail. So surely the Good Shepherd does.

And if you still aren't satisfied or convinced with that answer, if you think it is a cop-out, we now turn to exactly the same place Peter does – the cross. Where the death of an innocent man, where pain, suffering, and injustice come in the form of whips, nails, spit, nakedness, shame, fists, thorns, and – lest we forget suffering is not only physical pain – betrayal, despair, and forsakenness the likes of which we can't imagine. And we think our Good Shepherd lets suffering come our way unfairly? We think he doesn't know what we are going through? You think he can't use it? Really?

You're a dumb sheep! He's the shepherd. Any other shepherd in the world is just trying to make a profit. This one dies for the dumb sheep. They are not the same. And we want to complain to him? "He committed no sin (you have), neither was deceit found in his mouth (it is in yours). When he was reviled, he did not revile in return (you do); when he suffered, he did not threaten (you do), but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly (while we complain and say "it isn't fair"). He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

He suffered, why are you too good to? Don't you want to be like him? Then suffer.

He never asks us to do anything he hasn't done already. Even more, His suffering will always be more painful than ours because he truly didn't deserve it.

But don't miss the point, this isn't just a guilt trip sermon to say "you should stop complaining." No, Jesus and Peter know suffering isn't easy or fun. This sermon also is to point out that because his suffering was worse, we can know His love will always be greater than ours because he did it anyway. And let's not miss the point: His ability to work, still, in a broken world according to his perfect plan – is beyond calculation.

So if you find your trust, your love, your peace, your hope waning and wandering.

Return to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. Come to a Shepherd who knows you by name, whose name is upon you, who knows what pain and suffering is like, who will gently correct, lead, and walk alongside us in our pains and even in our obstinance. Return to the Shepherd and his words that have strengthened his people through all time and history and will do the same for you.

Words that remind you that even in the midst of suffering, deserved or not, you are loved, and you have a gracious, gracious Savior. Who gives gifts that help us endure, who gives us a gift of Himself, gone through suffering and death and out the other side. And he doesn't just sit there and call at us "come on over." No he

comes to us and Shepherds us through the valley of the shadow of death. Out the other side to his pastures.

“For to this you have been called” Peter says. Called to follow after a Good Shepherd, but folks that is a gracious thing. It is a gift. And It isn’t sadistic, it isn’t a prank or a trick. It’s a gift that gives us direction and meaning to our steps here, and a whole lot of grace should our steps wander. And it’s a path, following the Savior that leads where nothing else on this broken world leads – to life and life eternal. A path we don’t walk alone. That is a gift worth celebrating. In Jesus name. Amen.