

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

When people make up their own gods, it seems that they end in one of two terrible places. On the one hand, you get gods who are indifferent or impersonal or so far removed from humanity that you can never actually know them. For example, Islam, with a god who is so great and so other that you don't ever get to know him; the best you can do is his prophet, Muhammad. Or perhaps the modern elevation of money or knowledge. We don't call them "gods," but we put our trust in them, even though the dollars in your bank account or the information in medical journals literally cannot care about you at all.

And on the other hand, you get gods that are so like humans that they end up flawed, gods you wish you didn't know. In the ancient days you had the pantheons of Greek or Egyptian mythology, gods that were petty and cruel and just used humans as their playthings. Today you have things like Mormonism, where men literally become gods, which means that gods were once sinful men and therefore not eternally perfect, and also that there are countless gods out there, so god by definition cannot be all-powerful. With whatever false god you choose, you're going to have problems – big, eternal ones.

But we have the true God. He is the God whose power and glory and wisdom are far beyond our understanding, and yet who came and walked among us as one of us. He is the God who is so like us that He truly did take on human nature, and yet He remained holy, perfect, still truly God. Our God is the Good Shepherd, the God who is both much greater than His sheep and yet who loves them and is with them. As He tells us, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me."

So what does it mean that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows us? A big thing to point out is that this is much more than mere intellectual knowledge. When Jesus says that He knows His own, this doesn't mean that He just has a huge amount of trivia memorized about all His people. To be sure, He does know everything; He's God. The Bible tells us that He constantly knows even the number of hairs on our heads, for example. But even that isn't just trivia to impress.

No, when Jesus says here that He knows His people, the Good Shepherd knowing His sheep, it's a much fuller sense of the word. Jesus first spoke these words to the Jews in Jerusalem, including to some Pharisees. They would've heard the word "know" in its Old Testament sense.

You might recall from the Old Testament that "knowing" is how it's described when a husband and wife come together. It entails connection, closeness, experience. This is how Jesus knows His people. This knowing can be seen in at least three ways.

The first is that this knowing involves love, specifically a sacrificial love. The very first thing that Jesus says about being the Good Shepherd is, "The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." That seems bizarre, even backwards. A shepherd is typically in the sheep business to make a

living, not give up his life. And his sheep are all being raised to die at some point or another, either as a sacrifice or for food; why die for them?

The only thing that would lead the Good Shepherd to do this is love for His sheep. He values them, not for whatever price a sheep will fetch at the market, but because they are His. He knows them, each of them by name. He knows even the number of hairs on our heads. Again, that's not there to be impressive trivia. It's there to show us how much care and concern our God has for us at every moment of every day, that He keeps watch over us even closer than we do to ourselves!

In addition to this, remember Christ's wonderful words about His love: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Jesus did not lay down His life for just some animals or lesser creatures; He laid down His life for those He considers His friends, for those whom He loves. And that's you!

We see this love leading to a second element in how Jesus knows us and we know Him: He opens Himself up to us. Again, many false gods are far off, unknowable. They remain near-complete mysteries to those who would serve them. But not our God. The Good Shepherd speaks to His sheep. He tells us about who He is, about who He made us to be, about what He has done for us. He recounts for us many of the wonderful things He has done for His sheep in the past, and He gives us promises for the even more wonderful things He has in store for us for the future.

Do we completely understand everything about our God? No. There are some things that He has not revealed to us, things that perhaps would just confuse us or which we couldn't rightly handle. And there are other things that He has revealed to us that we still cannot fully wrap our minds around – His Triune existence, for example.

But this is where the image of shepherd and sheep can be helpful. The sheep know the voice of their shepherd. They do not have a grasp of the language he speaks. They don't know what every word their shepherd speaks means. But they know his voice. They know that this is the one who keeps them safe and brings them to good pastures and still waters and even carries them on his shoulders. They follow the shepherd's voice because that will bring them to the shepherd, and to all the good things that the shepherd does for them.

In the same way, we follow the voice of Jesus, the word of God, which leads us to Him. His word to us contains many things that, by His grace, we can and do understand. But even when there are things we don't understand, the Holy Spirit is still at work to teach us His voice. He works through the word to increase our faith, so that like sheep, we would know and trust that the Good Shepherd is the one who gives us every good thing.

Knowing the Good Shepherd through His voice, His word, leads to the third way in which our Lord knowing us is demonstrated. Through His voice, He brings us to Him. As Jesus says, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." Jesus doesn't speak His word so that His sheep hear it, think "I really like that sound," and then go on their way. Nor is He like one of the false gods who supposedly made the earth and only comes back to check on it and its inhabitants when He feels like it.

No, through His voice, Jesus gathers His sheep together around Him. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep, loves His sheep, and wants to be with them. God created humanity to be with Him, to receive His love and reflect it back to Him, to share in His peace and goodness. That's why we're here. That's why you exist: to be with God. Our sin broke that and brought separation between us and our loving God. But through Jesus' death and resurrection, He has atoned for that sin and made it possible for us to be with Him again.

Our Lord desires us to be with Him in paradise, just like He said to the repentant thief on the cross. What makes paradise to be paradise? Many good things, but the main thing is what God tells us in His word, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." There, we will be in the immediate presence of God Himself, the fullness of His splendor and glory and goodness washing over us continually. Knowing God in such a way, for all eternity, is the best thing that can possibly happen to a person. And it's what God desires for each and every person.

That's why He begins the process by gathering us to Himself in this life. Like we spoke about last week, with Jesus appearing to the disciples as they were gathered together and giving them His peace, Jesus does that still today. The Good Shepherd gathers His sheep, bringing them together as they follow His voice into His Church.

Note that Jesus doesn't go and get each sheep and keep it individually. The Christian life is not just "me and Jesus." It is rather being gathered into the Church, the fellowship of believers. Jesus says, "So there will be one flock, one shepherd." That one flock is the one holy Christian and Apostolic Church we confess in the Creed. It isn't the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. It isn't Christ Lutheran Church, Rawlins, Wyoming. It is simply all those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. It is the great, invisible Church throughout all the world.

And yet, while it might be invisible, it does have things that can be observed. You can see the places where the flock gathers. Jesus says that "they will listen to my voice." Where there are people gathered around Christ who hear and keep His word, that is the flock of God.

Our Lord gathers us together around His word so that we might know Him as He knows us. He is present with us, especially in His Supper, where we receive that life that He laid down for us. Through His word, the voice of the Shepherd, He reveals Himself to us, both letting us better know Him with our minds but even more so better believe in Him with our hearts.

In all this, our Lord lets us know His eternal, unchanging love for us, the love that brought Him, the Shepherd, to lay down His life for His sheep. Our God is the Good Shepherd, the only God who can truly say, "I know my own and my own know me."

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