

abides. When we don't repent, it's not because the Good Shepherd abandoned His flock. It's not as if the Good Shepherd didn't seek His sheep out. In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus poses the question, **"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?" (Lk 15:4).** The Good Shepherd seeks out His lost sheep through Word and Sacrament. He is faithfully in those means of grace, and it is through those Means of grace that God calls us to repentance and faith. Someone might ask, "Well, what about those straying sheep that don't come here to receive them?" The Good Shepherd is also sought through the prayers of the faithful such as in the Prayers of the Church; that He would to turn their hardened hearts back to Him. And if we're going to call the Shepherd good, than we must trust He is. God is faithful; He will surely do it.

Almost every Sunday in the Prayer of the Church there is a petition that God would bring back His lost sheep of the fold in more or less terms. I'm not suggesting the Vicar do this, but there are times it might be helpful to pause for some time to think about those wandering brothers and sisters by name. I think it's probably safe to say that we all have someone either in our immediate or extended families that this petition would pertain to. And yet, take heed lest you fall, too, for the **"Devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith!" (1 Pet 5:8-9).** If we are going to confess our Lord is the Good Shepherd, let us put our fullest confidence in Him to answer those petitions.

We begin every Divine Service Setting III with these words following the Invocation: "Beloved in the Lord! Let us draw near with a true heart and confess our sins unto God our Father..." Those words are drawn from **Hebrews 10:22**, which reads, **"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."**

The true heart is one that trusts in God's Word. The heart that is sprinkled clean from an evil conscience is the one that trusts in the promises of Baptism. You've heard me teach the kids the four words from the condensed version of **1 Peter 3:21**, "Baptism now saves you." In its entirety **Peter writes, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."** God's promise in Baptism is that you are made His sheep. He remains your Good Shepherd. Even when we stray, the voice of the Good Shepherd keeps calling us back. The exhortation to "draw near with a true heart" that precedes the Confession of our sins in the liturgy is a call to draw near to Christ in faith; trusting the voice of our Good Shepherd in certain confidence. Whenever God speaks, the true heart gives its assent and answers, "Yes, Lord. You know better than I do." Trust Him. He laid His life down for you. And He took it up again. By His grace alone through faith, though your life be laid down, it will rise.

Our brother Gary Slovak was suddenly called home to heaven yesterday. On every visit one of two things would happen. If he wasn't in a very social mood, after ten or fifteen minutes he'd say, "You gonna give me Communion sometime today or what?" Or when he was in a social mood, after a long visit I'd say, "Well, Gary, would you like Communion now?" It didn't matter how the visit went, whether we were laughing a lot of he was offering solutions to fix the world's problems, he'd get very serious and say, "Yes, I need it." He knew he needed the risen body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

That's what we celebrate this entire Easter season. It's not just the historical fact that Christ lives, but that we, too shall rise. When the Church responds with its Easter greeting, it is no mere enthusiasm, but sincere faith. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! And because our Good Shepherd lives we could very well add, **"AND SO, TOO, SHALL WE, ALLELUIA!"** In Jesus' name, Amen.