

I Will Dwell in the House of the LORD

Forever

In the name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, dearly redeemed family of God, loved ones of Neil Sockness:

Most of you know that “Pastor” means “Shepherd.” One of the things I enjoy most about being an under shepherd of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is seeing His loving care for His sheep. It has been my privilege to observe this in several families over the past months, including my dear father-in-law who went home to the LORD’s house this past summer. My wife and siblings got to be with their dad, just as Brad and Brent were with Neil as the Lord called him home to glory. But today we get to see still more of the Lord’s goodness in bringing you here. In one way or another we were all touched with God’s love through Neil Sockness.

Looking back on your own life or the life of a loved one like Neil, we see certain events that proved to be major turning points in our lives. Whom you marry, where you work – some are decisions we mostly make as God gives wisdom and lays opportunities in our path. But some are completely beyond our control like the family into which we are born. I know nothing about that detail of Neil’s early years, but I do know this: God gave Neil another family, a foster family, which has also blessed me.

You see, I had a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary who was outstanding among many faithful teachers. I am indebted to all of them. But I never wrote so hard and fast to get everything down in my notes as with one professor my Senior year. My class was privileged to have him back-to-back in Dogmatics and Romans. He laid out so clearly and lovingly our universal need for God’s forgiveness and the overflowing mercy of God’s grace in Christ. That summer the Lord called our dear professor home. Some of you already realize I’m talking about Neil’s foster brother, Dr. Siegbert W. Becker.

None of us were born knowing about our need for a Savior. Little kids in our Sunday School try to tell their teacher’s they’re not really bad. We all have to be convinced from a clear teaching of God’s law that every little sin would doom us to eternal hell, not only the bad we do, think and feel, but also the good we fail to do, our sins of omission. But who would stick around to listen to that if we could not also hear how God took pity on us and loved us for His own sake? God’s mercy triumphs over His judgment. We may be blessed to have faithful teachers and preachers of God’s grace in Christ. But most of us learn it first from our parents. In Neil’s case, God gave him foster parents and siblings in the Becker home. This was a joyful discovery for me when Neil told me, even more so today to see all of you here.

“The LORD is my Shepherd.” Today He is letting us see again what this meant for Neil and what it means for us who follow Jesus as our loving Lord and Savior. Just focus on that last verse of this favorite Psalm 23: **“Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.”** If you are a citizen of these United States of America, that should be especially meaningful. Our United States *Declaration of Independence* claims “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as endowments of our Creator. God says so much more in these sweet and simple words for Psalm 23:6.

While people pursue their own ideas about “life, liberty and happiness,” they often destroy themselves with excess. Left to ourselves we all would. Even when we know right from wrong, our best efforts can’t make a house a home or save our marriage from the two stubborn sinners that occupy it. But this Psalm teaches us to stop and listen. Christ is calling: **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”** And it’s the best “rest” possible because Jesus says this is **“rest for your soul.”** (Matthew 11:28ff NIV84)

Our Good Shepherd knows we are all sheep who love to wander. Maybe you've wandered far away from God. He's calling you back today no matter where you've been or what you've done. He loves you. He shed His blood to wash your sins away. He promised your ***"sins and iniquities I will remember no more."*** (Hebrews 10:17) His one-sided, New Covenant of pure grace and mercy means you don't have to pursue "life, liberty and happiness." In Christ, God's ***"goodness and mercy"*** follow you.

Through trials and tribulations we learn about God's goodness. God is good in His very essence. This is especially clear in the ***"mercy,"*** or unfailing love that He keeps sending after us. He put His Name on Neil in Baptism, then kept on blessing him throughout his life. When asked why he did not remarry after the Lord called Joann home, Neil answered, "I already had the best." He was content with that. God graciously gave him sons with God's blessing of grandchildren. Neil was faithfully in God's house to sing God's praises in worship and to support the spread of that Word which blesses more souls with peace. None of this would have been possible if God had not adopted Neil into God's family by Baptism.

Most of us have never tended sheep, but the ancients sometimes referred to them as "those of the golden hooves." Derelict pastures can be turned into beautiful meadows by a skillful shepherd with his sheep. They like to eat in the rich lowlands and move to the high ground. There they leave behind rich deposits. Sheep also eat noxious weeds like Canadian thistle and hundreds others that would crowd out the grass from green pastures. This too, I believe, the Holy Spirit means in this verse. The Good Shepherd uses His sheep to leave behind a blessing. It doesn't smell good to the world us. Sinners prefer weeds, and Satan keeps on trying to kill God's green pastures. But with God's Word and sacraments the Good Shepherd steadfastly gives parents and children the wisdom and love of God. Where there is turmoil, you can leave peace. Where there is bitterness, you leave behind forgiveness. Where there is conflict, you bring contentment. Instead of frustration, joy. Rather than rancor and quarreling, the love of God in Christ. ***"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"*** (Isaiah 52:7 NIV84) When you follow Jesus as your Good Shepherd, you have beautiful feet. ***"Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."*** (Matthew 5:9 KJV)

One of the most difficult things about funerals and memorial services like this is that they bring us face to face with our own mortality. Life flies by so fast. But God wants to comfort our spirits today as He comforted Neil along the way. Dr. Becker gave us a beautiful definition of "life." He said, ***"Life is the enjoyment of God's blessings."*** All of us would have been lost in our sins, trying to hide from God, destroying all of our relationships like our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden. But God came looking for them and us to call us to repentance and give us His peace. He wants us to enjoy true life in Christ where God loves to give and keep on giving His ***"goodness and mercy."***

God keeps calling us orphaned sinners by name. Listen to His voice. Thank God for giving you ears to hear and a heart to believe. From foster homes here on earth, God brings us to His happy home in heaven. From there we never ever have to leave.

Ten years ago the Lord called to Himself the soul of my maternal Granddad Erwin W. Seevers. Since he still said his prayers in German, I read Psalm 23 in his heart language for the sermon. To this day one of my Mom's friends will say the last word each time they meet: *Immerdar*. It has such a solid, comforting, hopeful sound. I hope it sticks in your memory forever. That's what *immerdar* means, "forever." I've heard of foster children shuffled from one family to the next, sometimes because of their behavior and sometimes because the foster homes failed. We're all just passing through this life. I'm glad I don't have to go back and relive my childhood. I'm glad to lay my head on my pillow each night and ask for God's forgiveness and hear again, "Son, be of good cheer. Your sins are all forgiven." One dying pastor told his granddaughter he felt like a dog scratching on the master's door; he wanted to go home so bad. Didn't know what was on the other side, just knew his Master was there. On the other side is your loving Lord Jesus who wants to welcome you home by His grace and merit to eternal glory with God. And you never, ever have to leave. ***"I will dwell in the house of the LORD – immerdar."*** Amen.