

Easter 4, Good Shepherd Sunday – Year C
April 25, 2010
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
John 10:22-29
Pastor Paul Horn

Who wants a Good Shepherd?
...a shepherd who gives eternal life
...a shepherd who protects his sheep

²² Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. ²⁴ The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

²⁵ Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

I know that December and Christmas are far removed from your memory, but do you know the story behind Hanukkah? The word means *dedication*. In December Jews celebrate Hanukkah to remember a dedication of the temple that took place 2100 years ago. The ruler of Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes, had marched to Jerusalem with his army and seized the city and the temple. He ordered the Jews to worship the Greek gods. He sacrificed pigs on the altar in the temple and ordered the high priest to eat the flesh of a pig, which, according to Old Testament law, was forbidden by God. Judas Maccabeus led a revolt against the Syrian government and in 165B.C. drove them out. The Jews then cleansed and repaired the Temple, and when they were finished, they decided to have a big dedication ceremony. For the celebration, the Maccabees wanted to light the menorah (the golden lampstand in the Holy Place of the temple). They looked everywhere for oil, and found a small flask that contained only enough oil to light the menorah for one day. Miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days. This gave them enough time to obtain new oil to keep the menorah lit. Today Jews celebrate Hanukkah for eight days by lighting candles in a menorah every night, thus commemorating the eight-day miracle. Did the miracle really happen? We don't know. Scripture has not revealed it to us.

But I bring this up because in our lesson from John 10, the apostle tells us that it was the time of the Feast of Dedication, Hanukkah, and Jesus was in Jerusalem, walking around the temple. Out of nowhere, a group of Jews confronted him, encircled him like a pack of wolves, ready to pounce, "Are you the Christ?" they demanded. Jesus had claimed to be the Christ, and the Jews wanted a Messiah, but they had their doubts about him. They wanted a Messiah to bring earthly glory to the Jews, like their ancestors the Maccabees. They wanted another great deliverance. They wanted a Shepherd like King David. Jesus was a Shepherd. He had told them that already. But as their Messiah Shepherd he had come to give his sheep deliverance from their spiritual foes.

They pressed him, "Tell us plainly!" They wanted a candid answer, not in parables, which they just didn't understand. Jesus replied, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I've performed should speak for themselves!" If only they had reflected on the Old Testament Scriptures... the prophets had foretold that miraculous signs would accompany the coming of Christ. But the bottom line was this, "You do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen. They follow. But you don't listen. You don't follow." It was their own grievous fault. He had given clear evidence and a loving invitation. But they sent the invitation back saying, "No thanks." Even though he answered their question in the affirmative, they rejected him. In fact, vs31 they picked up stones, ready to stone him to death, right there in the temple. He was not the kind of Shepherd they wanted.

Who wouldn't want a Shepherd to protect his flock? This Shepherd has the power. He is the Son of God. The miracles alone prove that He has the muscle to protect his sheep, not only against physical threats, of sickness, disease, terrorism, violence or natural disaster, but more importantly, he has the clout to guard and defend his sheep against their spiritual enemies; the wolves of Satan, the sinful flesh, hell itself, and death who wish to tear his sheep to pieces.

When the sheep feel the wolves closing in, when temptation comes alluring, when the sheep are sick, when loved ones die, when the sheep feel all alone, this Good Shepherd promises to lead them to the green pastures and the quiet waters of his Word. There in his promises they will find peace, joy, salvation, forgiveness and hope.

But what do the sheep do? What sheep are often apt to do; they wander away from the Shepherd. They become complacent and self-reliant. Life is going ok for them, so they don't need him right now. They do not think they need to hear his voice or to feed on his Sacraments, or to follow the path he has marked out for them. Although He knows better than they, they think it better to follow their own ideas and morals. Even when they experience poor relationships, poor finances, poor health, they do not run to the source of hope and comfort and strength, but they try to work through it on their own.

At times, we are those sheep, aren't we? And where do we find ourselves when we wander away and try to go it on our own? We are lost in this world with no purpose, no hope, depressed, despairing of life and defenseless against our enemies. We are like sheep that have fallen into a pit and can't get out. The Shepherd could very well say, "You want to do your own thing, fine. Let me know how that works out for you. You're dumb, defenseless sheep anyway..." But you do not have that kind of Shepherd. He is the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ your Savior.

The Good Shepherd says, "My sheep listen to my voice." My fellow sheep, listen now to his voice! I will agree with you, these first words we have heard from his mouth hurt. He has pointed out where we have erred. Our hearts ache and are weary with our sin. But he speaks this way so that we do not become complacent and self-reliant, so that we are not of the opinion that we can do it alone. He speaks this way to show us that we need a Shepherd.

He does not want us to despair of our sins and lose all hope, but to lift up our heads, to perk up our ears, and listen to our Good Shepherd. **“I give them eternal life and they shall never perish.”** That’s not something we can do on our own, is it? The wolves; the devil, our sinful nature, hell itself and death, wish to devour us for all eternity, so that we will never see the light of God’s eternal sheep pen. It’s what we deserve for our sins of failure to listen, of doing our own thing. But the Good Shepherd steps in and lays down his life for the sheep, even to the point of death. The wolves tear him to pieces, instead of us, so that we will never suffer for our sins. The Shepherd dies to give you life, a life free from the harm of your enemies. The Shepherd also takes his life up again, to give you life. By his resurrection from the dead, the Good Shepherd tears death to pieces, so that we confidently say with the Apostle Paul, **“Death has been swallowed up in victory!”** (1Cor 15) They, my sheep, who by faith have been given the gift of eternal life, will never perish. That’s the kind of Good Shepherd you have, one who gives eternal life, and who keeps that gift in a secure place.

I don’t know what they have stored in the depository on Fort Knox. Whatever it is it must be important because everything about that place says, “Stay away!” Perhaps you have some valuables, heirlooms, important documents, that you keep in a safety deposit box or a safe in your home. In either case, if someone wanted to and had the means to, they would break in and steal. Jesus, your Good Shepherd says, **“No one will snatch [my sheep] out of my hand.”** Salvation is not placed in the hands of the sheep, because... through the weakness and wickedness of our flesh, salvation could easily be lost from our hands... through false doctrine or the devil’s craftiness and might, our salvation could be snatched and taken from us. But God wanted to secure your salvation so well and so certainly that he placed salvation for safekeeping in the almighty hand of your Savior, Jesus Christ, from which no one can snatch us. He has power over all things, even your enemies, which he proved by dying and rising.

The Apostle Paul adds, **“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the Love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** (Rom 8:35ff)

This is our comfort, our hope, our sure certainty. Whatever the circumstances of your life... as your bodies grow weaker, as age creeps up, as you *walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you will fear no evil* – for not even death can tear us from our Savior’s grasp. When we wander away from our Shepherd, and sin against his Word, and he gently leads us back again and we despair because of our sins – he *will lead us to the quiet waters and green pastures* of his Holy Scriptures, where we are reminded and reassured that our sins are forgiven because he laid down his life for us. When we become depressed because of the stress and anxiety of life, we will listen to our Good Shepherd’s voice, because *the Lord is my shepherd, I will not want* – I lack nothing. He gives me everything. Since he gave me eternal life, will he not also give me what I need for my body here on earth? Yes! He has promised it. When I struggle with sin, temptation, the lures of this sinful world and wonder when this struggle will ever end... I will listen to his voice - *he will prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*. I know that

one day the struggle will end, and in heaven, Jesus will prepare a rich banquet feast in the presence of my enemies and they will know that they are the losers and I am the victor. And when I lose hope because of the hardships of my life, I will listen to my Good Shepherd, because he tells me that *that goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life*. Out of the loving compassion of his heart, he promises that he will give me patience and strength to endure hardship. And in the end, I know that *I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*. That's the kind of Good Shepherd I have... a Good Shepherd who gives me eternal life and keeps it safe in his hands. That's the kind of Good Shepherd you have. There is no doubt that you are Jesus' little lamb, for Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Amen!