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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/13/2008, for Easter 4A
John 10:1-10

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.(John 10:3, RSV)

Jesus of Nazareth is our good shepherd, and through Baptism we are the sheep of his pasture, glad to say. Yet his manner of shepherding is a strange one when it comes to the wolves of the world. Other shepherds try to lead the sheep away from the wolves. But our Good Shepherd leads us into the midst of them:

¹⁶Behold, I send you forth [Jesus says] as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.(Matthew 10:16, KJV)

We might wish it otherwise, but there is no getting around it: Our Good Shepherd wills for us to be “in the world” — at least for now. He does not will for us to rise up directly from the waters of Baptism into the glories of heaven. He wills for us to linger here below. And so, he prays for us here in this world with its wolves:

And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.(John 17:11, RSV)

As the saying goes, Christians are to be “in” the world, but not “of” the world. St. Paul phrases the adventure this way:

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.(Romans 12:1-2, NRS)

“Do not be conformed to this world,” but do live in the world and be good citizens of this world. As St. Paul says, we are to be subject to the governing authorities, even if those governing authorities are the pagan Roman empire of old:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.(Romans 13:1, RSV)

In this sermon, then, I want to begin to think about our Christian vocation not to escape the wolves, but to live with them.

First off, let's reckon with the thought that when our Lord sends us forth into the midst of the wolves, he is sending us among creatures he loves. The Lord loves wolves too, both the animals of the woods and the people of the city who might not be Christians but who nonetheless are our neighbors.

Take the wolves of the woods. Much of their lives are good, innocent, joyful, and impressive. They run and exercise their strength and their muscles. They take tender care of their cubs. They see, and in seeing might even rejoice in the beauties of God's creation — the meadow, the mountains, the rising and setting sun. The Lord loves the wolves too and would not have them despised because, after all, wolves are not demons, but creatures of God, destined for life in the peaceable kingdom:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.(Isaiah 11:6, KJV)

The wolves are like the whales. They might be strong and scary, yet they are the creatures of God, and he looks upon them with love and joy. And so we hear the testimony of the Psalms concerning the whale.

²⁵So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts. ²⁶There go the ships: there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein.(Psalm 104:25-26, KJV)

The same can be said the wolf: there is that great animal in the woods, whom thou has made to play therein.

Even more so should we count the life of our neighbors precious, whether they are Christian or no. However foreign they might be to us, however different their religion or their convictions, still they are the very human creatures of God, beloved to him, and they share in all humanity's dignity — why, a dignity “little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor.”(Psalm 8)

Second, when our Good Shepherd leads us out into the very midst of the wolves, he is launching us into a pretty good world out there. Our city benefits from the labors and the talent of many people, some of whom are Christian, some of who are not. This is obvious, I know, but worth remembering: Christians throw in their strength and their talents along with many people in our town, many of whom are not Christian.

This past Tuesday evening, Carol and I enjoyed a *Musica Sacra* performance at Carnegie Hall of J.S. Bach's *Mass in B Minor*. We had wonderful seats near the stage, and so we could see the expressiveness in the hands of Kent Trittle, the Music Director, and the look of joy and whole-hearted dedication on the faces of the singers. Some of the singers in that vast chorus might not have been Lutherans. Some of them might not have been Christians. Yet what a beautiful world that Chorus was creating. When our Good Shepherd sends the sheep into the midst of the wolves, he is sending us into a world with much beauty in it.

So, these are some preliminary observations about the vocation of Christians to be sheep in the midst of the secular city. First, the Lord loves the wolves, the bears, and the whole city, including our neighbors who are not Christian. And second, there is a lot of goodness and beauty in the secular city.

Now, let me turn to my chief point. You are the greatest social minister we will ever have here at Immanuel. When you get up from your pew at the end of the liturgy, you will be heading out into the great secular city. You will be heading to the sidewalks and the subways, to Starbucks and to the pub, to your family and to your friends, to your joys and to your job. Bring your Christian character with you into the city. You are the sheep of the Good Shepherd. Let the world see something of that in your life. You are the sheep of the Good Shepherd. Be thou a good sheep — one who bears something of the impress of the Good Shepherd in your habits and in your character.

You might have noticed over the years that when I stand here at the sacred desk, I try not to preach politics. I do not tell you how to vote, I do not tell you how to think about the controversies of the day, I do not tell you how to do your job. Partly, I refrain from such preaching because I am not competent to pronounce on such things. The better reason is that I do not want to trespass on the holy office you occupy: you are the lambs of Christ's flock positioned in the great city. Your great priesthood and adventure in life is to work out the intersection between your Christian character and the ocean of knowledge, opportunity, and responsibility over which you preside in your jobs and in your positions in life.

So, I aim to entrust the details of your vocation over to you, and to not tell you in advance how you ought to think or to vote or to conduct your job.

But that you ought to be the sheep of the Good Shepherd is something I can urge upon you. That you are in fact to bring Christian character into your vocation is something I believe in with all my heart.

So, if you are a banker, I cannot tell you how to arrange mortgages, but I can urge you to bring a sense of stewardship to your work. I can ask you to be mindful of the welfare of the people of our land, who are often harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, and they need you to shepherd them in some fashion similar to that of the Good Shepherd himself.

And if you are a soldier or a policeman or a firefighter, I cannot tell you about the details of your job, but I can urge you to practice the virtue of courage that somehow reflects the courage of Jesus himself.

If you are a business person or a manufacturer, I know nothing about pricing plans and advertising budgets, but I do not know something about the Seventh Commandment and so do you. Strive to give your customers a fair deal.

If you are a boss, I know little of your job except that you have opportunity to practice justice and compassion.

If you are a spouse or a parent, I am not in a position to dictate your life of love. But I am in a position, and so are you, to think of Jesus and to remember that love includes forgiveness, patience, strength, stubbornness, and integrity. How you sort such things out in the details of your home is something you know best. But that the image of Christ should influence you is something we should not doubt.

So, you are the sheep of the Good Shepherd's flock. He knows you by name and leads you out, meaning never to desert you. Even if wolf and bear threaten, Jesus will never leave you, but would rather lay down his life for you.

But in leading you out, by name, one by one, Jesus leads you into the great city. So, let me close with this thought. This great city needs you and your Christian character. For our whole city is battered by sin, death, and the devil. Our whole city is buffeted by temptation, covetousness, crime, terror, disease, heartache, and the inevitable decline that comes with age. Our whole city stands in need of hope and virtue and of the Good

Shepherd, and you are going to be the best sermon many of them will ever hear. You will be the best cause of hope many of them will ever know. And you will be the best example of virtue that will ever influence them. Let the character of the Good Shepherd flow through you out into the world, for the benefit of the world and for the glory of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.