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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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John 10:11-18
Laying Down His Life for Alan

A Sunday morning sermon on the occasion of Alan Hoffman's death

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

These days I am trying to give titles to my sermons, in hope that it might prove helpful to distant people who read sermons online. So, I have a title for this sermon, and it reads "Laying Down His Life for Alan." I mean our Parish Bookkeeper, Alan Hoffman.

My text is the first verse of this morning's Gospel Lesson, John 10, verse 11:

I am the good shepherd [says Jesus]. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.(John 10:11, RSV)

He lays down his life for Alan, that Alan might live.

Many of us are heartsick, I know, over Alan's death this past week. Alan was our Parish Bookkeeper for the past year, but his service to this congregation was much longer and deeper than that. How lonely this chancel feels now to know that Alan will not be serving again as Assisting Minister or Communion Assistant, which were roles that Alan loved very much. In past years, he sang in our Choir, served on the Board of Trustees, and chaired our Endowment Committee for many years.

His funeral here at Immanuel is scheduled for this coming Friday at 1 p.m., with reception afterwards in the church undercroft. My main funeral sermon will be then. But I can hardly keep myself from rejoicing in this morning's Gospel Lesson by applying it also to our old friend Alan Hoffman, for Christ lay down his life for that man, as well as for you and for me.

Let me begin by referring to a young shepherd boy who later became king of Israel. I mean young David, back when that lad was innocent and faithful and nigh on invincible. When all of Israel's soldiers wilted in fear before the giant, Goliath, young David did not fear, but was determined to fight and to defeat Goliath. Naturally, the king - King Saul - hesitated to let the lad fight the mighty giant. But David calmly reassured the king that he was indeed up to such a task. The shepherd boy convinced the king by relating some of his earlier adventures in his young life. Let me read the account of those wonders. We begin with King Saul trying to discourage David from taking on the giant:

³³And Saul said to David, Thou art not *able* to go against this Philistine to fight with him: for thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth. ³⁴And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock: ³⁵And I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth: and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew

him. ³⁶Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear...(1 Samuel 17:33-36, KJV)

And that is a wondrous thing, that a lad could stand up to and defeat such wild and fierce creatures.

As it turned out, David proved, by fits and starts, to be a good shepherd of Israel. He is honored by many as Israel's greatest king. David was a mixed man, as most of us are -- a passionate mixture of faith, lust, anger, honor, and poetry. But summing it all up, I think it is fair to say that David was indeed a good shepherd of God's people. But he was not *the* Good Shepherd. That status belongs to another man -- a lowly Jew from Nazareth in Galilee, our Lord Jesus. He too smote lion, bear, and wolf that the lamb might live, that Alan might live. Let me tell you about it.

The story of David grabbing the lion by the beard and smiting him is a great story and great image, unmarred by any fear or suffering in young David. But the story of Jesus smiting the wolf is different. It is not a story of a hero like David or Hercules, but of an ordinary man, beset by fear and weakness, but whose love for the flock is so strong that he endures the suffering of contending with the wolf.

When the wolf comes, a hireling runs away. He loves his own life more than he loves the sheep. But when Satan, that ravenous wolf came bounding toward humanity, hell-bent on slashing and ripping and slaying, Jesus sprang forward and contended with that beast and saved us.

Imagine the flock¹. They sense the wolf nearby. Perhaps they hear him howl. Perhaps they simply smell him as he stealthily approaches the flock. The sheep are fearful, and the shepherd, who knows his flock very well, comforts them by guiding them to the sheepfold. He stands there at the gate, vulnerable himself to the attack of the wolf, but he stands there till every last lamb has made it in. Then he turns and finds the wolf leaping toward him. The weight of the wolf knocks to the ground. He collapses to the road. "Get up!" the soldiers roar. But he cannot get up, so the soldiers choose a passerby, one Simon of Cyrene, to lift the weight. But really, there is no lifting of this weight for Simon. This is a cross, this is a struggle in which only Jesus can contend.

So, Jesus lies there grasping the wolf around the throat with all his might. The wolf bites him, tears him, rips him, in his hands and in feet and upon is brow. And with his mighty hind legs, the wolf opens a great and deep wound in the side of Jesus, slashing all the way to his heart. It is a fatal blow. But Jesus holds on. He maintains his grasp, seeking to strangle that wolf even with his dying breath.

And he does it! It costs this Good Shepherd his life, but he manages to slay that wolf. And he *must* slay the wolf, else we have no chance in this universe. He must slay the wolf, else Alan had no chance.

For you see, the story of the wolf simply lays bare what Alan knew and what you and I know also: that we are sometimes overmatched in this world. Alan was overmatched by vodka. Others are overmatched by lust or laziness or greed. Why else is it that we so ready fall to our knees each Sunday and make the words of the

¹ This part of my sermon is inspired by my memory of a passage in Charles Spurgeon's sermon "Whose Goodness Faileth Never."

Confession service our own:

We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves...

St. Peter's old admonition is still true:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. (1 Peter 5:8, KJV)

If Jesus had not stepped into the midst of the murderous attack, we had been lost. But Jesus did step into the midst of the attack, for Alan mattered all the world to him, as you matter all the world to him.

We have noted, then, the great heart of the Good Shepherd. His love for the flock is so profound that it makes him reckless of himself in our defense. Indeed, his great heart drives out any natural caution on his own behalf, so that he rushes to the defense of the flock.

Let us now recall a second trait of the Good Shepherd: he seeks after that one lost sheep:

⁴What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? ⁵And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. (Luke 15:4-5, KJV)

Picture the shepherd at the end of the day. He has guided the flock from dawn till dusk. He has led them to green pasture and to sweet water. He has defended them from lion, wolf, and bear. Now he counts them as he shepherds them into the sheepfold. What? One is missing. Ninety-nine are there, but one is missing, and he knows that one, for he knows his sheep. It might be a thin, mangy sheep, it might have a torn ear or poor wool, but it is *his* sheep, and he loves it.

So, tired as he might be at the end of the day, he leaves the ninety-nine and heads back out into the hills in search of the lost sheep. It is dark now, and therefore the footing is treacherous, but he pays the danger no mind. He seeks his sheep. He longs for his lamb.

By way of admission of failure, I am a shepherd who seems never really to have found Alan. At least, I never found him in such a way as to lead him back home. The only comfort I can give myself about this is that I had sense enough to petition the Good Shepherd on Alan's behalf. And that Good Shepherd never fails to find his lost sheep and to lay him on his shoulders and bring him home rejoicing. And so it is that we entrust Alan to the Good Shepherd.

In this sermon, I have been praising the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who is indeed worthy of praise. Now I close with a word to us sheep.

When I sit in the waiting room to see a doctor or the bishop or some other authority in my life, I often pray a prayer that goes like this: "Heavenly Father, please cause this doctor to be a good shepherd and to lead me into health as you define health. And cause me to be a good sheep, open to the shepherding."

That is what I am talking about now: that we should be good sheep of the Good Shepherd.

For one thing, being a good sheep means that we need not put up any pretense before Jesus. We do not need to hope that we are better than we are, for he knows us as we are. We might be mangy. We might have a torn ear or nary a good idea in our whole wooly head. We might have a bad record behind us. Yet to be a good sheep of *this* Shepherd means that we can rest in the assurance that he loves us nonetheless. He knows us, yet loves us.

Second, to be a good sheep of *this* Shepherd means that no matter how many blows we might have suffered in life so far, nonetheless we mean to maintain hope for the future. We mean to find that the best is yet to come. And so if life has conspired to throw us down into the dumps, even to leave us dead in our emotions, we mean to become lively again as soon as we can. For we have no ordinary Shepherd. What does he say? What is the purpose for which he lays down his life? It is that *we* shall have life:

The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. (John 10:10, KJV)

Do not, then, think that happiness is unsuited to you. Rather, happiness and a heart overflowing with life is your native state, not because of your own merits, but because of your Good Shepherd. Look, then, for life!

And a third trait of a good sheep is that, so much as can, we should quit straying from our Good Shepherd. It is true that if we stray, he will seek us. He will leave the ninety-nine and seek after us. It is a great privilege to have such a Good Shepherd. But there is no advantage for us in straying. In fact, there is only suffering. There are cliffs to fall from. There are creatures to lure us, but also to hurt us. There are substances to break down our nerves, our liver, our moral habits. We can save ourselves much suffering, and we can save our loved ones from much suffering if we would simply stop straying so much and instead draw near to the Good Shepherd, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.