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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, November 1, 2023, All Saints Day
Matthew 10:16-33

HOLY GOSPELMatthew 10:16-33, RSV
In last week's reading, we read of the mission Jesus gives to his Disciples. Now he warns them that they will face troubles in their ministry.

[Jesus said to his disciples] ¹⁶Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. ¹⁷Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues, ¹⁸and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them and the Gentiles. ¹⁹When they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; ²⁰for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. ²¹Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; ²²and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. ²³When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes.

²⁴A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master; ²⁵it is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Be-el'zebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

²⁶So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ²⁷What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops. ²⁸And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. ³⁰But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. ³²So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; ³³but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."

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

Through the long, long ages of the church, the saints are those among us who take seriously the words of Jesus in this passage:

²⁸And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28, RSV)

Today is All Saints Day. It feels like a good day to try to reckon with this call of Jesus to keep our souls alive, as the saints have done and are doing still.

I have begun with our Lord's saying about fearing the one who can destroy the soul because I have wanted us to understand the magnitude of the case before us. Jesus is sending his Disciples out into a dangerous world. He does not want them to lose their souls in the process.

But going forward in this sermon, I want to shift to an earlier verse in our reading — the one about being sheep among wolves. This is to be our *method* for keeping our souls. This is to be our new manner of warfare. We are to be sheep among wolves. We are not to be wolves in return. We are to turn that option down.

What can be more harmless than a sheep? Sheep do not have fangs, they do not have claws. They do not have horns to pierce the enemy. They are not even particularly bright. Their big advantage is that they can follow a shepherd. Our job is to follow our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

If ever there were an innocent sheep among wolves, it was Jesus. He could have attacked his opponents in a wolf-like way. When the crowd, for example, determined to throw him headlong off the cliff, he could have tossed them aside as if they were but rag dolls. Instead he quietly passes through them and goes on his way (Luke 1:28-30). He could have excluded Judas Iscariot from the Disciples, knowing as he did who it was who would betray him. Instead, he gave Judas a chance — a true chance to save his own soul. He could have summoned twelve legions of angels to punish a world set on crucifying him (Matthew 26:53). In fact, he could have declined to be born into this old world of ours. He could have remained safe and sound up there in heaven. Instead he came among us as a sheep amidst wolves. Oh! Much more than that. A sheep can benefit the world through its wool. Jesus benefits the world through salvation! Jesus benefits the world in eternity. But his method was to be as harmless and as innocent as a sheep among wolves.

And through the ages, that is how the Church has conquered the world. How could the fishermen do it? ...unlearned...more acquainted with the tides and the habits of the fishes than with politics or strategy. How could they conquer the world? They did it by conquering hearts through their gentleness. The apostles had no armies. "Put up your sword," Jesus says (Matthew 26:52). They had little wealth. They had few of the advantages of conquering armies. But what they had was enough: They had a good story to share with the world. They had the story of Jesus. It has won many a heart by now.

Jesus will stand up for the sheep. Note the happy ending to the heartbreaking path ahead for the Disciples. Jesus says this:

²¹Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; ²²and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:21-22, RSV)

What can be more horrible than this: that the father should deliver his son up to death? Or that the children should rise against parents and have them put to death? And if things should not come to death, still it is a heavy burden in life to "be hated by all for my name's sake." But let us not miss the encouraging words at the end, "But he who endures to the end will be saved." Likewise, later in our reading, Jesus assures his followers that even the very hairs of their head are all counted. Nothing shall happen to them that our God does not know about and cannot fix, so that the disciple can rejoice through all eternity.

And so Jesus will stand up for his sheep in the midst of wolves. But I close with this thought too. There is a sense in which the sheep are to stand up for themselves along with Jesus. They are to stand up, not with swords, not with fangs, but with gentle words. We might suffer injustice, but must never consent to it. Think of Jesus when that officer struck him on the face. Jesus did not destroy the man, but he did answer him. This took place when Jesus was being examined by the high priest:

¹⁹The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. ²⁰Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together; I have said nothing secretly. ²¹Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me, what I said to them; they know what I said." ²²When he had said this, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" ²³Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?"

Speaking up for the truth gives the adversary something to think about. It gives that one a chance to repent. So, you and I might suffer injustice. Our congregation might suffer injustice. But we must not consent to it. We must not settle with it. Our way forward is to be the way of the saint. It is to be the

way of sheep among wolves. It is to be the way of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.