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Easter 4B, April 21, 2024
John 10:11-18
The Shepherd Who Lays Down His Life

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

We have before us today a magnificent chapter of Holy Scripture — John, Chapter 10. Many precious things are told to us in this Chapter about Jesus our Good Shepherd. And that he is! Jesus is the Shepherd and Guardian and Bishop of our souls (1 Peter 2:25).

Today's passage from John 10 speaks of the Passion of our Lord. It speaks of the Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. It was not all that long ago that we read of our Lord's Passion, both on Palm Sunday and on Good Friday. Jesus died a cruel death on a cross. What was happening then? What was the inner meaning of that terrible death? Today, Jesus himself tells us, as if explaining in advance what would befall him. And so we come to my text from this morning's Gospel Lesson. Jesus says this:

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

The wolf approaches, growling toward the sheep, drawing nearer and nearer. The hired hand runs away. The sheep are not his. He does not own them, and it is a scary thing to face a wolf. So, the hired hand runs away. But the Good Shepherd interposes himself between the wolf and the sheep. The Good Shepherd sacrifices his life that the sheep might live.

We have three factors here: (1) The sheep. They face danger in this world. (2) The wolf, also, the bear and the lion. They would destroy the sheep. And (3) The Good Shepherd. He spares not his own life if only the sheep might live. Sheep! They are not of the same being or dignity as him. But the Good Shepherd loves those sheep anyway. He loves them to the utmost degree.

Let's take these three factors in order. We begin with the sheep.

I find it rather comforting to think that you and I do not need to claim any higher merit or standing in this world than that we are Christ's sheep. By baptism we become the sheep of our Lord's pasture. Humanity has reason to be grateful to sheep for the wool and the cheese they give us. But after all, to be called a "sheep" is not particularly high praise. Sheep are not very smart, and they are not very dangerous. If a sheep wanders off and gets lost, it is helpless most times to find its way back home. Now, a dog might do that. Some thief might kidnap a dog and take it miles away. But if that dog breaks free of the thief, it can often find its way back home. But not the poor sheep.

They do not have a good sense of direction. That is why the Good Shepherd leaves the ninety-and-nine and goes out in search of the one lost sheep. And when he finds that sheep, he places it on his shoulder and brings it home rejoicing (Luke 15:5). He rejoices, because either he finds the sheep or probably that sheep is lost. You cannot just wait around, expecting the sheep to show up. It is more likely to wander into the desert or fall off a cliff. Sheep are not all that smart.

And they are not good fighters either. They do not have claws and they do not have fangs and they do not have fierce tempers. They are little match for the wolf or the bear or the lion. They need to be protected, and the Good Shepherd does so, even at the expense of his life.

Again, I find some comfort in the idea that we do not need to claim to be anything higher in this world than sheep. We do not need to claim to be the smartest person in the room. And we do not need to claim to be dangerous. No need for us to wear a holster and brandish our six-shooters. It is enough for us to be able to say, "I might not be smart or strong, but I have Someone who is! I have Jesus, the Good Shepherd and Guardian of my soul."

Furthermore, St. Paul and Martin Luther would want me to add that sheep do not have to claim to be saints either. Looking at a sheep, you might well admire it for its innocence. And it is indeed innocent. And yet, it is not *mindful* of its innocence. It does not brag of it. If a sheep could brag at all, it would brag of its shepherd, if it has a good shepherd. And we Christians do indeed have a Good Shepherd. He throws his own innocence over us, as if covering us with a blanket. And so, St. Paul is able to say,

Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:31, RSV)

Or, as the dear hymn puts it:

My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
no merit of my own I claim,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

Refrain

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand,
all other ground is sinking sand. ("My Hope Is Built on Nothing
Less," LBW 293 or 294)

So, that is the first factor. The sheep. We need not claim overmuch for ourselves. We are the sheep of the Good Shepherd's pasture, and that is good

enough for us.

Second factor: Let us consider the wolf — the big bad wolf. In the Garden of Eden, the sheep was safe. It never had to look over its shoulder. It was not afraid of the wolf. They were friends. It was not threatened. And in heaven, it will be the same way. The sheep and all the animals will be able to give up their groaning (Romans 8:22). They will be able to live unthreatened. But in this fallen world, sheep face dangers. The fangs of the wolf are fearsome. The mighty paw of the bear can knock the sheep to kingdom come. Sheep might desire peace, and they might be peaceful creatures themselves, but they live in a world of violence. Sheep face predators. Sheep have enemies. Sheep face beings who would destroy them.

St. Peter speaks of the Devil that way. It is a verse of scripture Pastor Carol sometimes reads for us during Sunday evening Compline:

Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand and he will lift you up in due time. Cast all your cares on him, for you are his charge. Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith. (1 Peter 5:6-9a, LBW Compline)

Sheep face enemies. Christians too face enemies. The Devil would snatch us, destroy us, gobble us up, drag us down to hell.

Martin Luther lifted up three enemies we face. The Devil is one of them. The other two are sin and death. Angels can go through life innocent of sin. Either they are not tempted by sin or they always reject it. Sin seems not to be a problem for the angels. But it is for us. *We* are not angels. Sin means departing from the will of our Maker for us. If our Maker were foolish or wicked, it would be rational to depart from his will for us if we could get away with it. But the Creed teaches us that our Maker is good — thoroughly good, with no shadow of bad or incompetence in Him. All three Persons of the Holy Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — love us in a pure and amazing way. Right here, right now, they know what is good for each of us. And they tell us in their holy law. Therefore it is never really rationale for us to sin, no matter how much fun it might appear. But sin is out there, prowling around, beckoning to us. As sheep face the wolf, so we face sin — an enemy for us!

And then there is death — the third of Luther's three enemies of humanity. From beginning to end, the Bible hates death. In the Garden of Eden, the Lord tried to warn Adam and Eve to not disobey him lest they bring death upon themselves. Well, they did disobey, and they did bring death upon themselves. And upon us! This is not how things were supposed to be. Death is not what our Maker wanted for us. But it is there. It lurks. It casts its shadow on us, even when we are healthy and things are going well. Our Maker judges this

state of affairs to be intolerable! So, he inspires his prophet Isaiah to promise his people that better times are coming. And so we read this great passage in Isaiah, Chapter 25:

⁸He will swallow up death for ever,
and the LORD GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away
from all the earth;
for the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 25:8, RSV)

So, that is my second point. The first point was that we are the sheep of Christ's pasture and need claim no higher status than that. The second point is that, like sheep, Christians face enemies in this world. In particular we are harassed by sin, death, and the Devil. Now, let us turn to our third factor: the Good Shepherd. When Jesus was rejected, suffered, and died on the cross, what was happening then is that the Good Shepherd was laying down his life for the sheep.

What happened on Good Friday has *that* magnitude! It is not just that a good man died. That often happens. And it was not just that a good man died innocently. Alas, that happens too. It is more along the lines that *all* of humanity was under attack, not by strange beings from outer space, but by beings right here in our midst. I speak of sin, death, and the Devil. The wolf, the lion, and bear are not imaginary creatures. They prowl, they sniff the air, their muscles brim with strength, their teeth and claws can wreak destruction. Likewise with sin, death, and the Devil. They prowl, they are ravenous, they would overcome everyone in sight — even billions of human souls. But one Man stands between them and us. One Man, without a sword, without an army, without even his disciples, for they have abandoned him and fled. One Man stands in the breach, one Champion comes to fight, and by his stripes we are healed, and by his death, we are offered eternal life. Jesus, I say, is our Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for us sheep.

This is why we pray, "Thy kingdom come." Till it does, we still struggle against foes who would destroy us. *Their* destruction is assured — that of sin, death, and the Devil. Our resurrected Jesus will see to that. But in these threescore and ten years granted to us, we are permitted to take our place alongside our Good Shepherd and join in the fight, knowing that we will win in the end.

Sin! It is worthy of being ignored. Sin would hurt us in many ways, and yet it has no power over us unless we consent to it. Do not consent to it this coming year. Say to sin, "You loser! I'm sticking with my Good Shepherd, not you."

Death! To join our Good Shepherd in battle against death we should do what Luther says. We should cherish life! Luther taught that there is no true

obedience to the commandment “Thou shalt not kill,” that does not take the positive form of cherishing life. That means patience with others and understanding. It means good will toward others. It means all the virtues. It includes cherishing our own lives, so that we do not break ourselves down by way of too much food or drink or drugs or recklessness or so many ways in which we humans are capable of harming ourselves. Cherish life!

And the Devil! The Bible brings many charges against the Devil. He is a murderer (John 8:44). He is a liar and the father of lies (again John 8:44)! He is a tempter, bold enough even to tempt Jesus in the wilderness. And then he has one other trait that we should worry about: he is wily! St. Paul warns us about this in his passage about the “whole armor of God”:

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the *wiles* of the devil. (Ephesians 6:11, RSV, my emphasis)

This means that the Devil is clever in figuring out ways to hurt us. Perhaps the best rule of thumb for detecting the wiles of the devil is to figure that whenever sin looks good, the Devil is lurking, working behind the scenes, trying to arrange things to hurt us.

So, there we have it: the Good Shepherd and the sheep of his pasture. There is a sense in which things have remained the same for the longest time! Centuries drift by and still we human beings face enemies. As the sheep face the wolf, the bear, and the lion, so our human race still faces sin, death, and the Devil. But something has changed. Easter has changed things. The resurrection of Jesus means that we have a Good Shepherd who will not fail us. Our privilege is to fight against sin, death, and the Devil, confidently taking our place at the side of the Good Shepherd, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.