

“Staying With Shepherd”

John 10:22-30

April 17, 2016

4th Sunday of Easter

Two sheep were wandering outside of the sheep pen one day. Since there were wolves around, this was a very dangerous thing to do. They could be snatched away at any moment by a wolf and devoured. The shepherd, seeing his sheep wandering, picked them up and brought them back to the sheep pen. Here, they would have food to nourish them, shelter to keep them, and a fence to protect them from the wolves.

One of the sheep, grateful to have been brought into the pen, remained in the pen. He ate the food regularly and stayed in the safe shelter. The other sheep kept looking outside the pen with longing eyes. Out there was more freedom to do what he wanted to do and go where he wanted to go. It didn't look to him to be any different than the sheep pen and certainly didn't appear to be very dangerous. So he left the sheep pen, wandered around for a bit, and came back in. No big deal, he thought. He chided his fellow sheep for not doing the same and for being an alarmist when his fellow sheep warned him about staying in the pen and not wandering about outside the pen.

The second sheep became more bold. He would wander away from the pen, the shelter, and the food supply for longer periods of time. He would come back infrequently. Each trip was further away from the pen and lasted for a longer amount of time. Finally, one day, the inevitable happened. The wolf snatched up the sheep in his jaws and devoured him.

Now, who is to blame here? It would be rather foolish to blame the shepherd who found the sheep, put the sheep in the safety of the pen, and provided for all of his nourishment and protection. The fault lies with the sheep who forsook the safety of the pen to wander about where the wolves were in control.

Jesus uses the language of a sheep and a shepherd in the Gospel reading for the 4th Sunday of Easter, traditionally referred to as “Good Shepherd Sunday”, because our relationship with God is like the relationship of sheep to the shepherd.

We are the sheep. Some may get the mistaken impression that this is a compliment – as in we are spiritually or emotionally cute, soft, and cuddly like sheep. Not only is that not a compliment, but the opposite is true. We are like sheep because we are stupid. The prophet, Isaiah, declares, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way,” (Is. 53:6) We have wandered away from the goodness of God to go our own way – the way that seems best to us. That is what sin boils down to: going a way that is different than God's way. It may be the way of the world or simply our personal way. It may be a way that is obviously evil or a way that appears to be good. If it is not God's way, it is sin.

That way is dangerous to us. It separates us from God and His protection. We are sheep also because sheep are helpless. A sheep stands no chance against the wolf. In the same way, we are so helpless and defenseless against a superior foe – Satan, the deceiver and accuser. While we may *think* that we can be in control of our lives, be safe on our own, resist temptation, and fight off Satan successfully, the Scripture says differently: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion [or a wolf] looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8) On our own, we are doomed.

Yet God sent a Shepherd – His Son, Jesus Christ - to His gather His lost and wandering sheep. He purchased all the sheep – including you and me – by shedding His blood on the cross. In your baptism, He chose you and placed you individually in the sheep pen of His Church where you are safe from the wolf who seeks to devour and destroy you, namely, Satan. In our text for today, Jesus says that we are so safe that “no one is able to snatch [the sheep] out of my hand.” At the end of the text, He says it even stronger, “no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.”

Yet it seems that some sheep have indeed been snatched out of the Father's hand. They were in the pen – baptized, confirmed, regular church goers – but now they are not. Maybe you know some of them. They might be your spouse, your children, dear friends, formerly active members. What happened? We often blame God. He didn't keep His promise. Something *has* snatched His sheep out of His hand and He didn't stop it. The temptations of this world, the sinful culture, or the encouragement of other people are responsible. Baptism “didn't take” in these individuals. Confirmation did not involve adequate instruction. The Word of God did not accomplish its purpose.

But to blame God or the ways in which He works as the reason that people are gone is like blaming the shepherd in the story that I told at the beginning. In that story, the reason the sheep was out of the pen and devoured by the wolf is that the sheep foolishly wandered away from the pen on its own and, because of that

choice, was devoured by the wolf. The wolf didn't snatch the sheep from the pen. The sheep wandered away from the pen on its own accord. It wasn't the shepherd's fault.

In the same way, the reason that people aren't here is not because God fails to keep His promises. Nothing has snatched people – your spouse, children, or friends – out of God's hand. It is not because Baptism doesn't "work" or Confirmation was inadequate. It is not because the Word of God is lacking in power. It is because sheep who have been redeemed and placed in the safety of the Good Shepherd's pen remain sheep. Sheep like to wander. People have wandered away from the love and protection of God on their own. By their own choice, they have placed themselves in danger of being devoured by the devil.

How, then, can we take any comfort from Jesus' comfort that no one will and no one can snatch us out of the Father's hand? As we look at those of us around and, especially, those not here any more, it all seems very "iffy". And it is – if we depend upon our ability to defend ourselves against the wolf which wants to devour us.

Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." Being safe and remaining within the fold is dependent, first of all, in Jesus knowing us, not in how much we know Jesus. Hearing Jesus' voice and being with Him so that we may follow Him insures that we have eternal life and that no one will ever snatch us out of His hand.

We hear Jesus' voice whenever we hear His Word. We hear His Word when we hear pastors (from the Latin for "shepherds") speak the Absolution, read the Holy Bible, and preach the Law and Gospel. We hear His Word when we read the Bible privately, meditate upon the Bible in our devotions, and study the Bible together.

We are with Jesus in a most intimate way when we take His body and blood into our mouths through the forms of bread and wine. We share the most intimate of fellowship with Him in His Supper.

We follow Jesus when we conform our lives to His will by the power of the Holy Spirit and when we are where He has promised to be: in the preaching of His Word, in the distribution of His body and blood, and in the gathering of His people.

When we hear Jesus voice, when we commune in His presence, and when we follow Jesus where He leads and where He has promised to be, THEN we have eternal life and THEN no one will and no one will be able to snatch us out of the Father's hand. Of these things, we can be confident and assured.

When I, as you pastor, encourage you to have personal and family devotions, to be in Bible Class, and to be in worship frequently and regularly, I am not trying to hassle you or put more pressure on you in your busy lives. I am not simply encouraging you to obey the 3rd Commandment or perform a religious duty. I am trying, as an undershepherd of Christ, to keep you in the sheep pen and be safe. I am not saying to withdraw from the world or to be in the church building 24/7. However, here is where you are safe. The more you are in the world and of the world, the more you are in danger. Here, you cannot be snatched out of the Father's hand. The more you are out there, the greater the chance the devil will devour you.

To say that we are "unsnatchable" would, according to the spell checker on my computer, be using a string of letters that is not a real word. The idea behind it (that we cannot be snatched out of the Father's hand) is, to many, not a real concept. Yet it is true. As one commentator wrote, "It is one of the precious things about the Christian faith that our continuance in eternal life depends not on our feeble hold on Christ, but on His firm grip on us. We should notice that the teaching of this verse is not that believers will be saved from all earthly disaster, but that they will be saved, no matter what earthly disaster may befall." (Morris, p.521) When you hear Jesus' voice, fellowship with Jesus' body and blood, and follow Jesus way, you are truly "unsnatchable sheep." Amen.