

"They Shall Never Perish "  
John 10:27-30

March 31,2013

Easter Sunday (*Sunrise service*)

Once upon a time (a real time, not an imaginary time), there was a wolf. He was a fat old thing. You see, he had it pretty easy. Whenever he wanted to eat, he only had to walk to the door of his cave and look at the sheep that fed there. He'd pick one out, go after it, and, with a minimal struggle, devour it. The more he ate, the hungrier he became. He was a wicked old thing. Sometimes, just for fun, he'd poke his head out of the door and howl. All the sheep would begin to shiver at the very sound of him. He'd chuckle and say, "Yes, you better be afraid, you stupid sheep, because one of these days I am going to be eating *you* and it won't be pleasant. Ha! Ha!"

This big bad wolf had a name - a name that always inspired fear in the sheep. His name was Death. Death was always hungry and never satisfied -- always eating sheep and always wanting more. And he stunk. The stench about him was worse than his name or his howl. He was altogether dreadful. He was in charge and all the sheep knew it.

One day, feeling hungrier than usual, he poked his head out of the cave door to howl. What he saw surprised even him. There, on his doorstep, was the fattest, juiciest sheep he'd ever seen. That sheep was pretty gutsy, he thought to himself. He drew in the air to fill his vast lungs and then let out a stone-splitting howl. All the other sheep in the vicinity turned tail and ran in fear. But this sheep just stayed there, grazing outside the wolf's cave. He kept on eating, as though he hadn't even heard him. The wolf was getting downright angry at this sheep's boldness. He came bounding out the door and went right up to this impertinent animal. Again, he sucked air into his lungs and let the foul smell of his breath go right in the sheep's face.

The sheep looked up and blinked as the hideous odor of decay was blasted in his face. Totally unconcerned, he simply stared back at the wolf. Now, the wolf was in quite a tizzy. "Don't you know

who I am?" he snarled. The sheep calmly replied, "Yes, I know." The other sheep began to creep back at a distance to watch this confrontation. "Well," snarled the Wolf, "aren't you afraid?" The sheep looked at Death, that old wolf, right in the eyes and said, "Of you? You've got to be kidding."

Now the wolf was livid and he spoke with a menacing tone: "You're in for it, lamb chops. I am going to take you out slow and painfully." There was a moment of silence and then the sheep said, "I know." The other sheep were all astonished because they had never seen anything like this before. But, the moment the wolf pounced, they turned away in a hurry. A great sadness filled them. They had hoped that just this once the wolf was not going to get his way with this one. But their hopes were dashed.

It was an awful and ugly sight as the wolf chowed down. It was slow and painful, just as he said it would be. And, in the end, there was nothing left. He turned his ugly face, red with blood, to the other sheep, and he belched. They turned tail and ran, knowing he'd be back for them one day soon.

As the wolf went back to his cave, he took out a toothpick and cleaned his teeth, thinking he had never tasted a sheep quite that good. Nothing tough about that meat, no sir! It was tender and rich and altogether satisfying. Then a thought hit him that surprised him: it was almost as though his insatiable appetite had actually been satisfied for once. The thought was a little disturbing. Well, no matter, he thought. And off he went to bed.

When the morning came, the wolf wasn't feeling himself. It was almost as though he was getting a bit of a tummy ache. Such a thing never happened before. He always woke up ravenous and went off to start eating first thing in the morning -- at least a dozen or so sheep before the dew was off the grass. But not this morning.

His tummy was grumbling. By noon he was feeling more than discomfort. He was feeling positively ill. He who had brought such pain on those poor sheep was getting a dose of pain himself, and it was most unpleasant. He kept thinking back to that one impertinent sheep he had eaten

yesterday afternoon, the one that had tasted strangely good. Could it have been rotten? Could it have been poisoned?

It wasn't long before he stopped thinking altogether. The pain was just too great. He rolled around on the floor of his cave, yammering and howling. The sheep heard the sound from outside and didn't quite know what to make of it. They crept cautiously nearer and nearer to the door of the cave and turned their heads to listen. What could it all mean?

Sometime in the dark of the night the wolf let out a shuddering howl. Something was alive and moving inside his gut. Something pushed and poked and prodded until, with a sudden burst, the gut was punctured and a hole ripped open. And something - rather, someone - stepped right out through the hole, right out of the massive stinking stomach. The wolf felt like he was dying. And, I suppose, in a way he was.

The figure that stepped out of the wolf's belly was totally unknown to the wolf. Why, it looked like a shepherd. He had heard of such a critter, but had never actually met one before. With a staff in his hand, he walked around and stood facing the wolf. Then he began to laugh. He laughed and his laughter blew open the door of the wolf's cave. He laughed and the sheep were filled with bewilderment, wondering what was going on in there. He laughed as he looked the wolf square in the eye.

"So, you don't recognize me, old foe? It was I who you ate outside your house three days ago. It was I that you promised would die so horribly -- and how you kept your promise! But what do you propose to do about me now?" "You?" the wolf gasped. The voice was the same; he recognized it. The shepherd was indeed the sheep whom he had swallowed. "You? But how? Oh, the pain!"

The shepherd smiled and said, "Well, I think you're pretty harmless now, my friend. Go on and try to eat some of my sheep. I promise you that as fast as you swallow them down, I will lead them right out through the hole I made in your stomach. And then you'll never be able to touch them

again." The wolf howled in fear and anger and rage, but there was nothing he could do. The Shepherd had tricked him, fooled him good!

The Shepherd then stepped outside the door and called the sheep together. They knew his voice, too. They'd heard it before. They stood before the Lamb who had become the Shepherd and listened as he told them what would happen to them. "You'll die too. He'll come out in a few days and be hungrier than ever. He'll swallow you right down. But don't worry. I punched a hole right through his belly and I promise I'll bring you out of there again."

Once upon a time -- and that time was two thousand years ago -- that promise was made. And that promise still holds true, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-28) It is with the comfort of this promise that Christ reaches out to us this morning as we hear the glorious story of how Jesus, who had gone into the belly of the wolf on Friday afternoon, came out again on Easter, leaving a way for us to follow. It is with the comfort of this promise that Christ will once again feed us with His Supper in our later service. We will once again taste the body and blood that went into the wolf's mouth, but which the wolf could not hold. As you eat and drink, you have the same promise, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:54) Let the wolf howl and snarl as fiercely and horribly as he will! Let the wolf continue to pick us off one by one. We know about the hole in his tummy. We know about the Sheep who is the Shepherd.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.

*This sermon is based on materials prepared by Pastor William C. Weedon, director of Worship and chaplain at the International Center of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Pastor Schlund gratefully acknowledges their use.*