

Easter 4
May 3, 2009

The Good Shepherd Saves his Sheep

Pastor Michael Ewart
John 10:11-18

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ and especially you, Tyler, Katie and Jamie,

This weekend is confirmation weekend. Can all of you remember back to when you were confirmed? For many of you, it means remembering back to a day much like today when you endured a high-pressure examination before the congregation. It probably ranks among the times in your life when you were most nervous! Perhaps you remember the actual confirmation rite... and receiving communion for the first time. Can you remember how meaningful that experience was... to receive Christ's body and blood for the first time, and be assured personally of his complete forgiveness?

Now think about this... from the time of your confirmation until today, can you think of any rocky times you've had in your faith life? Times when perhaps you drifted from God... when you succumbed to temptation... times when you followed the crowd instead of following the Savior. Raise your hand if you can think of times when your faith has been attacked since the day you were confirmed. That's a lot of hands. I'm going to guess confirmed member raised it.

Friends, I am here to remind you today of four things: 1) Those attacks on your faith will continue to come. 2) I'm here to convince you that you do **not** have the power to stand up under them. Yes, you heard me right. I want to convince you that you are not strong enough to stand up under the attacks that will come on your faith. 3) But I want you to know that you do have a Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, who is strong enough to overpower your enemies. And 4) You're not alone... you are members of the body of Christ... the flock of Christ. And in that flock, God gives us strength as well. We'll talk about all of this under the theme: **"The Good Shepherd Saves his Sheep."**

We read from John 10:11-18

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. 17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

If you could be any animal, which would it be? I bet we'd get a wide variety of answers. Tiger. Bear. Cheetah. Eagle. Dolphin. But I feel fairly confident in saying that you probably did not immediately think, "I wish I were a sheep." Why not? Well, think about it. Sheep are helpless before their enemies. They don't have sharp teeth or claws. They can't run fast. They don't make sharp turns. They're not stealthy. They don't know how to hide. Their fur doesn't blend with their surroundings. Why, they can't even make a fierce or threatening **sound!** Therefore, sheep are very susceptible to predators of every kind. In addition, sheep aren't

particularly good at finding water and pasture for food. They tend to wander from the rest of the flock where at least there is some safety in numbers. In short, they are very needy, defenseless animals that must be taken care of and protected. So who wants to be called a sheep?!

Would you be offended if I told you that Jesus our Savior has called us “sheep.” Perhaps we don’t like to admit it, but when it comes to things spiritual, we are sheep. We aren’t strong enough or ferocious enough to fight off our spiritual enemies. We can’t run fast enough to get away from them. We can’t hide from them. We can’t even talk big to scare our spiritual enemies. Like sheep we are helpless before them. We also have this tendency to wander from God, his truth and his church. We don’t understand where to find life-giving water and nourishment. Therefore Jesus says that we, like sheep, are defenseless, and open to attack.

Jesus mentions two types of enemy of the sheep. Enemies from without. And enemies from within. “The wolf attacks the flock and scatters it.” The wolf, here, refers to all open enemies of God who attack the faith of believers. Certainly, the first enemy we think of is **Satan**. He first attacked Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and successfully led them to doubt God and his love. To this day he continues to attack believers in Christ. Working with Satan is this **sinful world** in which we live. The unbelieving world also attacks believers. The world attacks by tempting us into thinking that “everyone is doing” this sin or that, so it’s not really that bad. The world tries to convince us that faith is stupid, that living under God’s rule is oppressive, and that true freedom comes when you live how **YOU** want. The third enemy is very close to us. It is our own **sinful flesh**. This enemy is within us. It hates God and only wants to do what is contrary to God’s will. All three of these enemies attack sheep individually, and the flock as a whole, that is, the church of Christ. They pick out the weak and straying and try to tear them apart. They try to scatter the flock, knowing that apart from the shepherd, they are easy prey.

But besides these enemies which attack the church and believers from the outside, Jesus warns of enemies within the church as well. He says, “The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.” Can there really be danger within the church? Absolutely. We dare not think that just because someone says they’re a Christian or just because they can quote the Bible that they are a faithful under-shepherd of God. Read church history, and you’ll see countless examples of pastors, priests and popes who have misled God’s flock. Such leaders have no love for Christ, nor true love for His people. They lead for their own benefit and advantage.

You’ve heard of that, haven’t you. A pastor or church leader who took advantage of God’s people for his own personal gain. Unbelievers love those stories and use them to fuel their attacks. “See, the church is all about control, power and manipulation.” Our response? Yes, there are some bad apples in the basket. Jesus said there would be. This is evidence that the humans... even church leaders... are sinful human beings. Not that the church is a corrupt and evil institution.

So Jesus warns of these false shepherds. When the church is under attack, such leaders abandon the sheep and run away. Notice that Jesus doesn’t say these leaders run away from the wolf when it attacks. They run away from the **sheep** whom they do not love. They freely hand over the sheep to the attacker, almost as if the false shepherds and the wolf were working together!

* There will be attacks, from without and from within. I asked all of you who have already been confirmed to think of times when your faith was attacked or when you were wandering from God. Was it hard for you to think of such a time? I’m guessing not. I’m guessing several examples flooded into your head, and that you could probably give examples even from

this past week. [And you who will be confirmed, Satan, the world and your own flesh will attack you also.]

So... the attacks real. And just as important is that we recognize the reality that we are weak and defenseless. We do not have what it takes to fend off these attacks. Until we admit this sobering reality we are in grave danger.

But know this: dear Christians, there is hope for us defenseless sheep. There is protection and safety for us. There is a place for us, and a guardian who can and does fend off all attacks. We are **safe only with the Good Shepherd**. In contrast to the “hired hands” who don’t love the sheep, mislead the sheep, take advantage of the sheep, and who run off when there is danger, Jesus calls himself the “Good Shepherd”. He is a unique shepherd who loves his sheep with a perfect love.

The Good Shepherd proves his love for the sheep in that he “lays down his life for the sheep.” The term “to lay down” one’s life, is unique to John’s Gospel. It’s not found elsewhere in the Bible. There are two thoughts contained in this verb. First, this phrase stresses the **willingness** of Jesus when he gave his life for us. His life wasn’t forced from him. We have an improper picture if we think Jesus was caught by surprise by attackers and valiantly fought to the death. Jesus did **more** than that! Jesus knew from eternity **and planned from eternity** that he would give his life for us. Nobody forced Jesus to do anything. Jesus knew the penalty for sin – death. Jesus came to earth to face God’s wrath for sin. With full knowledge, he became the Good Shepherd knowing that it would mean emptying himself completely by giving his life for his sheep. What joy for us to know that Jesus willingly gave his life for us! Truly he is the Good Shepherd whose love we can never question!

There is a second meaning we must pay attention to in the phrase he “laid down his life” for the sheep. In the Bible’s original language, the verb implies a temporary action. When we lay something down, we intend to **pick it up again**, don’t we? When you take off your coat when you get home, you “lay it down”... but not forever! You intend to take it up again when you leave the house. So also, when Jesus laid down his life for the sheep, this was not permanent. Three days later he took his life back again and rose from the dead.

Under normal circumstances, the death of the shepherd is bad for the sheep. It leaves the sheep defenseless, and the wolves have a feast. But with Jesus it’s different. By his death he defeated our attackers. He rose from the third day to prove his victory was complete. He now sits in power and authority over all the world. Our Good Shepherd lives and reigns! He has all power and authority and uses it for the good of his flock – for all believers – for you and for me.

Our text gives us even more comfort regarding our Good Shepherd. “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.” Our Good Shepherd who keeps us safe isn’t a strict, frowning guard who secretly despises those whom he must watch over. Jesus knows his sheep, and they know him. It is a loving and tender relationship. This is a knowledge gained by personal involvement and experience. In fact, Jesus proclaims that this knowledge of the sheep is the same as how he knows the Father and the Father knows him. What comfort to know that our Good Shepherd knows us by name and loves us!

We have seen that attacks will come. We are powerless. Jesus, our Good Shepherd protects and defends us. One more comforting truth here. Our text teaches us that we are sheep who are united in one great flock. Note how Jesus defines who the members of this flock are. There are many false teachings regarding what this one flock is. The Roman Catholic church claims it is the one flock about which Jesus spoke. Other churches claim that denominations

must ignore differences and unite into one giant Christian church. They believe this is what Jesus wants us to do since he speaks of only one flock. But what does **Jesus** say?

Jesus says **HE knows** those in his flock. And those who are in the flock **know HIM**. Jesus also says, "They will listen to my voice." Membership in this flock is determined solely by a person's relationship with Jesus Christ. The spiritual, heavenly reality is this **Everyone** who really knows Jesus Christ... who knows who is – true God and true man... who knows what he did – lived a perfect life; suffered and died on the cross for our sins; rose from the dead... who really listens to his voice – knows, believes and obeys all his teaching without adding or subtracting... **all** such people are members of Christ's one flock. Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, black, white, rich, poor, Americans, Hispanics, babies and the elderly, men and women... all are one flock under our Lord Jesus Christ. This unity in the flock, then, is something **invisible**. Jesus knows me, and I know that I know him. But I don't know the relationship of any other person to Jesus since I can't look into their heart.

Nevertheless, God is pleased when we join a visible church. While there is an invisible, spiritual, heavenly unity of all believers, Jesus instructs us to join only a visible church where everything he has commanded is taught. A church where nothing is either added to his words, subtracted, nor changed nor distorted. In such a church, we receive encouragement from fellow members of Christ's flock. We stand strong in Christ's Word. By God's grace you have found such a church!

Dear Christians and especially our confirmands, recognize who you really are. You are sheep. But is it bad to be called sheep? Not since it means we have the Good Shepherd to take care of us and keep us safe. Although we have a sinful desire to be spiritual independent, independence is a bad thing for the small, weak and defenseless – and that is just what we are spiritually. But the Good Shepherd watches over us and defends us. He has defeated every enemy by his perfect life and innocent sufferings and death. The Good Shepherd has taken his life up again in victory.

And so hear his voice! Know your Savior. Know him by studying his Word regularly. Confirmation is not /was not graduation. Confirmation is not like finishing a building which now only requires periodic maintenance. No, confirmation is like finishing a good meal. You're full. You're satisfied. You're body has been well nourished. But you'll still be hungry the next morning. And in a few days you'll be very weak if you don't keep eating. So feed your faith with the Word. God's promises will lead you to trust in your Good Shepherd. Turn to him regularly in prayer. And know that He has called us together into one flock. Be found in the flock frequently for here there is safety, protection and blessing. May God bless all of us and keep us in his tender care as one flock until life everlasting. Amen.

May the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding guard and keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.