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“Lay Down Your Life”

John 10:11-18 (NRSV)

[11] "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

[12] The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away--and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. [13] The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

[14] I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own 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 do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

[17] For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. [18] No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

UNCERTAIN TIMES

Where do I go from here? We've all asked that question from time to time, and people are asking that question now more than ever. It's a sign of the uncertain times in which we live.

Often there is no clear answer to that question. Often we honestly don't know what to do when we lose a job or a loved one. We honestly don't know where to turn when we have to downsize and move to a new community.

Everyone here today knows what I'm talking about. Most of us at any given time are going through some significant transition.

And if you're one of the "lucky" ones who have a rather settled, uneventful life, I have two words for you. Just wait. None of us can escape the wilderness of change and uncertainty. It is a part of every life.

And yet this is what many of us spend our lives trying to avoid.

Do you remember that scene in the movie, Jurassic Park when the T-Rex is chasing some people that are trying to escape in a jeep? The camera pans in on the rear view mirror of

the jeep that plainly reads, "Objects are closer than they appear." And then we see a very large angry dinosaur fill up the mirror.

Life sometimes seems like that scene from the movies. We look in the rear view mirror of life and find that something very terrifying is gaining on us.

Tragedy is nipping at our heels. Our creditors are getting too close for comfort. Swine flu is just around the corner.

And please don't forget that soon we'll also be in hurricane season yet again. Objects are closer than they appear. So where do we go from here?

WORRY

One solution is to worry.

We are aided in this by the news media. Sensationalism is the order of the day. Journalism thrives on the anxiety provoking story. They promote the idea that catastrophe is just around the corner because they know that if we are afraid, we will keep watching.

Don't look now but that swine flu is coming up close in your rear view mirror ... and so forth. The news may change, but the tone never changes. You better watch out something is going to get you.

A man in Australia in 1939 discerned by reading the news that the South Pacific Basin was going to be caught up in a war very soon. He didn't know when, but he knew it was going to erupt into a war, so he wanted to do the most judicious, the safest thing possible for his family.

He looked at a map of the South Pacific to determine the safest place because he was going to sell everything he had in Australia and move his family there. So he did. When he found that place, he liquidated his business and all of his holdings; he put everything in cash, and moved to Guadalcanal.

And, as you remember, it became the site of one of the most horrible battles fought in the South Pacific during World War II. Trying to avoid what we fear can often put us in even hotter water. FDR had it right. Fear itself is the greater enemy.

I've said this before, but it bears repeating. If you want to feel less anxious, turn off those twenty four hour news channels and leave them off!

The Bible does not say that CNN is your shepherd. The Bible says that the Lord is your shepherd.

More than that, worry is at its core an expression of atheism. If we spend an inordinate amount of time stewing about all that is wrong with our world, then we are practicing atheists.

By our actions we doubt God's providence and God's presence. By our actions we are saying that God doesn't know and care about us. By our actions we are saying that some problems are too big for even God to handle.

Another problem with worry is that it ruins our health. How many times have we said, "I am just worried sick about this?" There's a lot of truth to that statement. Anxiety can literally make us sick, very sick.

In the Greek language the word translated worry could also be translated choke or strangle.

That's what anxiety does to us. It chokes us. It strangles us. It keeps us from thinking straight, and it often leads to erratic behavior.

When I think about the major conflicts that I've had in my life most of them have been with people who were very worried and anxious. Worry not only destroys our health; it also destroys our relationships with others.

And if you're still not convinced that worry is a bad idea, I would remind you that Jesus commanded us not to worry. He said don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will take care of itself.

So by now I'm sure you've got the point. Worry is bad. The Bible says so. But, I have found that it's not enough just to say don't worry and quote Bible verses.

If we are to successfully put down our worry, we have to pick something else up.

This morning I want to encourage you to lay down your worry so you can put your faith in the Lord. Lay down your anxiety so that it is possible to follow the good shepherd.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Our lesson for today begins with Jesus saying, "I am the Good Shepherd."

Even though most of us know very little about sheep and shepherds we all like this image. I never fail to read the Twenty Third Psalm at a funeral. The psalmist tells us that no matter where we go or what happens to us God is with us.

Even the "valley of the shadow of death" is not a walk to be feared for those who have God as their shepherd. In the middle of the night at the hospital we never tire of hearing Jesus say, "I am the good shepherd."

But, what does it mean to be a good shepherd?

Jesus makes the distinction by talking about bad shepherds first.

Bad shepherds don't really care about the sheep. They're just hired hands. When the wolf comes to attack the flock, these hired hands will run away.

But, God as revealed in his Son, Jesus is not like that. God doesn't abandon us to those objects of fear that seem so close and threaten to destroy us. God cares for us. God fights for us. God knows us by name. God loves us. God saves us.

That's what it means to be a good shepherd. In fact God as revealed in Jesus loves us so much he even lays down his life for us.

There are many things that happen in our life that threaten and worry us. Often we may not understand what God is doing in our lives and why we have been led down a particular path.

But, we have this promise. No matter what happens God will not abandon us.

If God loved us so much that he sent his Son to live and die for us, then we can trust that same God to finally lead us home.

We may see through a glass darkly now, but we can trust the biblical promise that underneath are the everlasting arms.

God in Christ is the good shepherd.

And we are the sheep of his pasture.

SHEEP LISTEN TO THE SHEPHERD

If that's true, then what are the implications for our life? First it means that as sheep we must listen for the voice of the shepherd. (cf. John 10:4)

I am told that in the land of the Bible many different flocks of sheep often share the same water source. You would think that they could never separate them again. But, after the sheep are watered the shepherd walks away and gives his special call.

And all the sheep in his flock ... and only the sheep in his flock come because they know his voice. They know the shepherd, and the shepherd knows them because they have spent time together.

If we are to hear the call of the Good Shepherd, we must come to know him. We must become a part of his flock and spend time meditating on his word.

So many people who are in trouble spiritually and emotionally complain that they find no solace in the Christian faith.

But, quite often I find that they are not scheduling any quality time with the Good Shepherd. How can we know the comfort of the Good Shepherd if we do not listen to his voice? How can we find our way in life if we listen to the voices of fear instead of the voice of hope?

I'm often guilty of doing the same thing. Quite often I too listen to the wrong voices. I listen to voice of fear. I listen to voice of anger. I listen to voice of despair.

But, I have an advantage. Every week I have to listen to Jesus. It's my job!

I've mentioned this before but I love what one great theologian who was also a pastor said. The prophets spoke when he heard from God, but the parish minister speaks each week whether he or she hears from God or not.

But, I've come to trust the fact that God does speak to me each and every week through the Scripture. The big question is this: am I willing to really listen?

This week has reinforced this lesson on a personal level. Some of you know that this week has not been a very good week for me. But, in my sadness this image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd has been exactly what I have needed. Instead of focusing upon what I had lost, I was able to focus upon what God has promised.

You see knowing God is not just a matter of right theology and biblical knowledge ... although both of those are important. Knowing God is also a matter of thinking about the promises of God in the context of real life situations.

In other words apply this passage to the things that are bothering you today. What is the wolf at the door in your life? What threatens you the most?

Is it the fear of illness and death? Is it the fear of financial ruin? Are you worried about where our country is headed? Are you worried about global warming? Are you worried about the flu?

Are you worried about all of the above? Many of us fit into that "all of the above" category these days!

Don't misunderstand. These are very real threats. We have good reason to be afraid. There are real wolves at the door in our world. And we would be foolish to say that these wolves don't exist.

But, the gospel message is this: in the end the wolves don't win. Even the biggest "badest" wolf of all, the wolf of death is no match for the love and salvation of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

HE LAID DOWN HIS LIFE

The gospel message tells us that the cross was no accident. The cross was no tragedy.

The cross was God's plan. The cross was God's way of bringing salvation to a world filled with wolves. God's salvation was revealed in the life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus.

Our passage for today makes this very clear. Jesus told his disciples,

[17] For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. [18] No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father. John 10:17-18 (NRSV)

Jesus, the Good Shepherd voluntarily laid down his life for us, the sheep. It was not an act of weakness but an act of strength. The gospel of John really emphasizes this point. As Jesus is being tried, it soon becomes apparent that He is not really the one on trial. The powers that be are on trial.

For example, Jesus was before Pilate on trial for his life. And Pilate was amazed at how this prisoner was so calm in the face of immanent death.

So Pilate asked Jesus, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?"

And Jesus replied, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above ... " John 19:10-11 (NRSV)

Jesus' attitude was a great threat to the "powers that be." They controlled people with the tool of fear. But, Jesus was not afraid. Even the cross did not make him afraid. And this unnerved the religious and political leaders to no end.

This Jesus would give Pilate nightmares for the rest of his life, and this Jesus would also prove to be a thorn in the side of political and religious leaders for generations to come.

If we have a Savior who can defeat even death, then we no longer have to listen to those "hirelings" who promote a gospel of fear and loathing. The prophets of CNN have lost their power. They have been replaced by God's Son, who says,

"I am the Good Shepherd. I will come between you and those things that threaten to destroy you. I will lay down my life for my sheep."

Some commentators suggest that in Jesus' day when the shepherds took their flocks to pasture; they had crude sheep pens constructed throughout the area. They consisted of

stones piled up on four sides with a narrow opening through which the sheep would pass to spend the night. In this way the flock was protected from bandits and predators.

And guess where the shepherd would sleep? He would lay down in that narrow opening. In this way he would form a gate. He would literally lay down his life for the sheep. (cf. John 10:7-9)

The courage of those shepherds has been well documented. They loved their flock. Their community was dependent upon the well being of the flock.

And so some shepherds would literally lose their life defending their flock from thieves and predators. And Jesus said, "This is the kind of love the Father and I have for you. We come between you and all those very real threats that you fear."

Jesus lays down his life for you, and that makes all the difference. That's why communion is such an important sacrament. We need to hear his voice of reassurance again and again as he tells us, "This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood shed for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

LAY DOWN YOUR LIFE

Now how should we respond to this amazing, divine love?

We too should lay down our lives in service to the gospel. Instead of spending all our time trying to insulate and isolate ourselves from the wolves of the world, we are called to be good sheep and follow the voice of Jesus.

Communion is not just a symbol of God's salvation and forgiveness. It is also the call of our Shepherd to live and love in a different way. It is a call to commune with our heavenly Shepherd and the flock that he loves so much.

And it is also a call to focus our hearts and minds on a greater vision of salvation. One of the reasons that we often perish is that we have no vision of what God is calling us to do and be. (Proverbs 29:18, KJV).

Communion focuses upon that greater vision. It transports us to a time when people will come from the East and the West, the North and the South to eat at God's table.

You may have noticed an allusion to this world wide vision of salvation in our lesson for today. Jesus told his disciples,

[16] I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. John 10:16 (NRSV)

Who are these other sheep who become a part of the flock?

In our Bible studies we were not quite sure what this verse meant. Some of us thought that this referred to the Gentiles who would soon become the majority in the Christian faith. Others thought this verse might suggest that God would provide a way for those outside the faith to hear and believe in God's salvation as revealed in Jesus Christ.

But, however you interpret this passage; it seems to me that this verse offers hope on a grand scale. It offers a vision of a greater salvation.

The Bible tells us that Jesus the great shepherd is not content to let even one sheep die in the wilderness alone. He is always looking to expand the flock and restore the joy of our salvation. (cf. Luke 15:4-7)

One of the reasons that we are sometimes not comforted and strengthened by the words of Scripture is because we identify with the wrong character in the story.

Many of us, especially "pastors" and leaders in the church tend to identify with the good shepherd. We say that we are under--shepherds to the Great Shepherd. We talk about pastoral care. Some of you refer to me as Pastor Frank.

And there is some truth to that. After all in the final chapter of John's gospel Jesus did restore Peter by telling him to show his love. And how would Peter do it? Peter would show his love for Jesus by feeding his sheep and tending to his flock. (cf. John 21:15-25)

But, it is important for us to remember that Jesus is always the shepherd, and we are always the sheep. The prophet's words are still true. We like sheep keep going astray. (cf. Isaiah 53:6)

By the way that was true for Peter as well. For the rest of his life he was a mixture of faith and denial. He was always a sheep who was going astray. (See, for example Paul's account of Peter's behavior in Galatians 2:11-14)

And so there should be no distinction in the church. There are no experts when it comes to faith. We are all part of one flock. We are all sheep. We are all sinners without hope except for the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

And we have just one job. We must try to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow where he calls us to go.

In order to do this we have to give up the illusion of control. Just as Jesus laid down his life for our salvation so we must lay down our life and follow him.

Amen.