

Easter 3 / Confirmation Sunday | St. John 10:11-16
April 30, 2017 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God, heavenly Father, out of Your fatherly goodness You have been mindful of us poor, miserable sinners, and have given Your beloved Son to be our Shepherd, not only to nourish us by His Word, but also to defend us from sin, death, and the devil: We beseech You, grant us Your Holy Spirit, that, even as this Shepherd knows us and helps us in every affliction, we also may know Him, and, trusting in Him, seek help and comfort in Him, from our hearts obey His voice, and obtain eternal salvation; through the same, Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 155)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the tenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. / "I am the Good Shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice. So there will be one Flock, one Shepherd." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, *"the great Shepherd of the sheep"* (Heb. 13:20), who died and rose again for all, dear fellow redeemed:

The prophet Nathan came to King David with a sad story. He said, *"There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him"* (2Sam. 12:1-4). If you have heard this story before, you know that Nathan was speaking about the evil things David had done. Though he already had everything he needed, David committed adultery and murder to get what he wanted.

Nathan's story also fits as an allegory of the Christian's life in this world. To the world, the Christian looks like nothing but a weak, vulnerable lamb. All the wicked need to do is snatch the Christian out of his Keeper's hands, and that little lamb is done for. It seems that such offenders often succeed at this. We think about the attacks against Christians that were recently carried out in Egypt by followers of Islam, which left 44 dead and many more injured. Attacks

like these have been happening for awhile, as wicked men attempt to force the faithful to bow down to a god of their own making. Last Monday (4/24) marked the 102nd anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, when the ruling Turkish government eradicated an estimated one and a half million Armenians, most of whom were Christians.

Attacks are also happening in our country, but they are typically of a different nature. Not many Christians experience violence in America, but more and more they are being shouted at and shamed because they believe and confess what the Bible teaches. They are told to get in line to support things like any sort of sexual relationships that people decide to pursue, gender confusion, the murder of the unborn and the elderly, and a laundry lists of other things that militate against the moral law of God. The growing force of these attacks concern us. Could we be charged with a crime because of our religious beliefs? Might we even be thrown in jail? We often feel like the world sees us – weak, vulnerable.

I

And in many respects, we are just that. We are guilty of thinking that the world holds greater power to harm us than God does to help us. Or we concern ourselves more with how the people around us look at us than how God does. In these ways, we show our sinful weakness. When the preparation for Confirmation is most successful, the confirmands should begin to understand how little they knew before class started and how much they still have to learn. They should recognize that the devil's attacks will only grow more intense the longer they are in Christ.

Jesus' warning to His disciples the night before His death is for everyone who follows Him, *"Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"* (Mt. 26:41). St. Paul expressed this struggle against the sinful nature with these words, *"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing"* (Rom. 7:18-19).

It is important for us to recognize this weakness, to see ourselves as we really are – as those who are helpless by ourselves to be right with God. We look little and insignificant to the world, and we are little and insignificant compared with the power of the Almighty God. What sinful mankind counts as a mountain, God calls a molehill. What sinful mankind counts as greatness, God calls rubbish. The world has no glory that God covets. The Creator needs nothing from His creation. But the creation needs everything from its Creator.

This is why sinners must acknowledge their weakness. It is the weak upon whom the Lord has mercy. He seeks those who are lost. His devotion to sinners is like a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to go looking for the one that wandered off (Lk. 15:3-7). Jesus knows His sheep. Every single one of them matters. That brings joy beyond words. The almighty God of the universe knows you. You matter to Him. You mattered to Him before you were even conceived and born. And you will continue to matter to Him throughout your earthly life and on into heaven.

Because you matter to God, He warns you to beware of hired hands that do not care for you and for wolves that want to snatch you from His flock. A hired hand is someone who is

supposed to protect you but does not. The care of Jesus' sheep starts in the home where parents teach their children right from wrong and instruct them in the Bible, pointing them to their Savior. Care is also provided in the church by the pastor who speaks God's Word. If parent or pastor are concerned chiefly for their own well-being, then they will not be prepared to protect the little lambs when the wolf threatens.

And who is that wolf? Ultimately it must be the devil who is always trying to drag away God's children. He employs any means he can to do this. He uses the pressure of society to make you cave in and give up the faith. He may even use your closest friends to coax you away from Jesus. And don't forget that he has an ally inside you—the old Adam—which entices you to do what you know you should not.

But Jesus is no hired hand or wolf. He will not stop fighting for His sheep. *"I am the Good Shepherd,"* He says. *"The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep"* (v. 11). The Good Shepherd took His concern for your soul all the way to His death. That was what He had to do to rescue and secure His beloved sheep. He was betrayed by the hired hands of Israel and gave His flesh into the jaws of the devil and death. He did not run from this terrible anguish and suffering. He stood His ground in front of the flock and absorbed the violent assault of bloodthirsty enemies. The Good Shepherd gave up His life to save the lives of His sheep. But they are not now without the Good Shepherd. He rose again from the dead. He leads and guards them still.

II

Of ourselves, you and I most certainly are weak and little, but in Jesus we are very strong. The world may regard us *"as sheep to be slaughtered,"* but *"we are more than conquerors through him who loved us"* (Rom. 8:36-37). Our lives are a picture of Jesus' life. Paul explains that the Christ *"was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God"* (2Cor. 13:4). We also are weak, both in our estimation and in the sight of the world, but in baptism we were raised with Jesus in whom we *"walk in newness of life"* (Rom. 6:4).

By His grace, *"God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God"* (1Cor. 1:27-29). It is no good thing to be weak in Christian living or weak in the faith. We see what happened to David when he gave into his sinful weakness. But it is very good to see ourselves as weak and little before God, to acknowledge our desperate need for His help and salvation. We are exactly the ones God wants to save, the ones He has chosen for glory.

The devil and death saw weakness in Jesus as He hung on the cross, and they moved in for the kill. But they got much more than they bargained for. Underneath His humanity was the iron hook of His divinity, which tore devil and death to shreds. You also look like an easy target to the devil and his cohorts. You don't even seem able to fight back. But your weakness is deceiving. You do not stand alone. You are clothed with a hidden armor which breaks the jaws of every wolf. For you are clothed in Christ. He joined Himself to you in baptism, and with you He remains (Gal. 3:27).

This is why you can say with me: I boast in my insignificance, in my vulnerabilities, and in my weakness as the world measures me. I will boast in these things, as St. Paul writes, *“so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong”* (2Cor. 12:9-10). **“I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb.”** I am nothing on my own. But I am everything and have everything in Him.

Jesus is your Good Shepherd and mine. And no matter how young or old you are, you will remain His little lamb. You are the one He brought up and raised along with His children. You eat His bread and drink from His cup. You rest in His arms. Therefore be glad at heart! *“For [your] Shepherd gently guides [you], / Knows [your] need and well provides [you], / Loves [you] every day the same, / Even calls [you] by [your] name”* (ELH #177, v. 1).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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