

St Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church

Pastor Mark Gartner

Sermon for Easter 2 (Confirmation Sunday) – April 28th and May 1st, 2011

John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 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.”

Dear Sheep in God's heavenly Flock,

Growing up in inner-city Milwaukee, I must admit that I do not know a whole lot about sheep. In fact, the closest thing I have come for 45 years of my life is visiting sheep at the petting zoo. But for the life of me, I can't quite figure out why sheep get such a bad name. Out of all the animals on the earth, sheep are right at the top of animals that live some of the most care free lives. What concerns do they have? They have a shepherd who guides them, provides food and water for them, and protects them from all the bad things in life whether it is making sure they do not fall off a cliff or whether it is driving away the sheep's predators like the friendly wolf. I don't know about you.....but that life seems pretty good to me.

While sheep may not be something that too many of us are very familiar with, the Bible spends a lot of time talking about sheep. In the Old Testament, God's people, the nation of Israel were called sheep who would one day receive their true shepherd. All throughout the Bible, we as children of God are even called sheep. On this Confirmation Sunday, I see 18 very special sheep sitting right here in front of me. These are sheep that we have watched grow up right before our eyes. We can remember the day that they were baptized and became one of Jesus' sheep. We can remember the first day of school. We can remember some of the ups and downs that these 18 young sheep have experienced in their rather short lives. Today we are going to use the picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd and we as God's children being his very special sheep. We are going to use a theme that builds on the picture language of sheep and their shepherd:

Sermon Theme: It Is Good To Be A Sheep!

- 1. The wolves are coming**
- 2. The Good Shepherd has come**

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.” Did you catch one of the very important messages that Jesus was trying to pass on to you? If you didn't, I will repeat it for you. Listen to this very carefully.... there are wolves out there! Not just one wolf, but many wolves that have one thing on their minds – to wound, kill and destroy God's sheep. That is the terrible tragedy of this wicked world. The terrible wolves of sin, death, and Satan all are coming and want to rob us of our hope; murder our dreams; destroy our peace. This isn't some fairy tale with a wolf that is huffing and puffing to blow your house

down. These wolves are very real and very intent on hurting and harming our faith and our eternity in heaven.

So what do these wolves look like? I will tell you that they are sometimes very hard to see. Maybe the wolves are that little voice inside of us that tries to convince us that it's okay to wander away from Jesus. After all, who needs Jesus; you are a strong, mighty, self reliant sheep. You can handle whatever comes your way – lose your job, no big deal, I can make it by myself. Depression – well you can overcome it with a drink or two. Loneliness – well you can fill that void with the internet. Heartache – well you just keep pretending as though everything is just fine. Self reliance – well, I have big shoulders.

The wolves might come as the friends who make fun of us for going to Sunday School or Bible class. The wolves might come as all those pressing needs that convince us we have no time for church, or reading my Bible, or praying to my heavenly Father. The wolves want you to back slide on your confirmation promises to be faithful God even to the point of death. The wolves come and work to convince us that the Bible is lying when it says..... We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way. The wolves just don't want us to believe that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God or that the wages of sin is death, and the only hope is to trust in Jesus.

There is one thing that we need to remember as we look at these wolves. They will never stop attacking the sheep. Wolves are always looking for their next prey. Wolves are always looking for their next victim. The Devil and all the sin that is in us and around us is always looking for one more way to wreck our faith and lead us away from God and his way to heaven.

2. The Good Shepherd has come

Truly this would be a sad tale if we ended with the arrival of these wolves. But it does not end here for there is more, much more, to tell. Today, by the grace of God I can share that Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, the Redeemer of the world, our great Good Shepherd has also come. Your Savior from sin, your defeater of death, your defeater of Satan, has come so you could be one of God's sheep.

The presence of Jesus makes all the difference, means all the difference to us - who have found ourselves taken advantage of by humanity's many wolves. **"I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep."** Those are bold words, brave words, but are they true words? You who have been burned so badly and completely in the past are understandably skeptical, cynical of the Christ's commitment and promise. You are not so ready to be taken advantage of again; you are not overly eager to risk your heart, your mind, your eternal destiny - not without assurance or guarantee that Jesus is different.

So how do you know that Jesus the Good Shepherd will be able to protect his sheep from the many attacks of the Devil and sin? I want you to take a little walk with me to the one place that will reassure you of the love and strength of our Good Shepherd, Jesus. We are going to take walk through the Bible where we will see why it is good to be one of Jesus' sheep.

Let me introduce you to a man - Matthew is his name, collecting taxes was his job. Because he is one of those men who worked for the Roman government and cheated his own countrymen, he was hated, despised, not allowed to associate with the normal people. One day Jesus stopped at Matthew's table and said, "Follow Me." Matthew did and he received a new life - a life of forgiveness which saw him received into the Christian community and adopted into God's family of faith. The Good Shepherd changed his life and made him one of his sheep.

Here is another man, a man possessed by demons. He has been driven from his home, family, friends.. He is dangerous, frightening; and he is alone. His days would have ended that way if it had not been for the day he met the Savior. Within moments the Savior made him healthy and whole; and by the end of the day, able to return to his family. Jesus had kept his promise to give the man life and give it to the full.

Remember the lepers, ten to be exact. They once had a disease considered to be so horrible, so contagious, that they had been sent away from wives, children, church, and society. Special laws had governed their existence: they must live outside of the city; they must not get close to others; they must call out "unclean" if someone approached them. They were doomed to die slowly; they were doomed to die alone. They had no hope. The wolves had come and taken everything from these men. Despair would have been their fate if Jesus, their Good Shepherd, had not healed them, restored them, given them life and given it to them in fullest measure.

Walk with me through Scripture. Meet a woman, a widow. She is in mourning. Her only son has died. She is with her friends, on the way to bury this boy who was her pride, her future. Scripture relates how Jesus met the funeral procession, stopped it, brought the young man back to life and gave him back to his mother.

Look there! There on a skull-shaped hill is a unique situation. Crucified by Jesus' side is a man. He is a thief by trade. He was condemned to death, and the man has but a few short hours to live. If ever a person has faced a hopeless future, it must be him. Listen as he speaks. He confesses his sins and proclaims the innocence of Jesus. Then he turns and says, "Remember me when You enter Your kingdom." And to this hopeless, helpless, dying criminal Jesus speaks, "Today you will be with Me in paradise." The man died, but he died rich. His last moments on the cross had an abundance his entire life had lacked. On that cross, the thief knew it was good to be one of Jesus' sheep.

Let me tell you why it's good to be one of Jesus' sheep: Jesus knows you by name. He knows how many hairs are on your head. He knows when you hurt and when you are happy. He knows when you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death because he is walking right beside you. He knows the challenges. He knows the obstacles. He knows the difficulties. And he leads you to springs of living water.

Your shepherd laid down his life for you, to save you – to redeem you. Remember what happened there when you were made God's own child -- a child of God for time and for eternity. And today on your confirmation you are confirming those very promises that were made at your baptisms. Your Good Shepherd has defeated all your enemies and all the wolves who are attacking you. There isn't one enemy that Jesus did not defeat in this life. Remember, he was true man so that he could be born under law and die the death we deserved. And he was true God to live God's law perfectly, to overcome those temptations that trip up the rest of us, and who died to pay for the sins of the whole world. My fellow sheep.....it's good to be a sheep. Don't become a flock of sheep who are scattered by the wolves. Walk with your shepherd. Follow his voice. You know your shepherd. And your shepherd Jesus knows you. Today and everyday of your lives confess to the world, "it's good to be a sheep!"