

### ***The Hands of the Shepherd***

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel reading is a portion of what is commonly referred to as our Lord's Good Shepherd discourse. In it Jesus gives what is certainly one of the most cherished images we have to picture his relationship to us. It casts him in the role of our protector, our provider, our all wise leader, and, because the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, he's the sacrifice for our sins. And in the brief portion of the Good Shepherd discourse we heard today there appear what are some of the most comforting words in the entire Scripture. Speaking of the sheep that are his Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and *no one can snatch them out of my hands.*" In times of sorrow, loss, trial, temptation, and doubt – when we are facing the worst that Satan and the world can throw at us – the sure promise of Jesus that he will never let go is one in which we can take refuge and find genuine peace and security.

But what really struck me, though, as I studied this text for the umpteenth time in preparation for this message, is that as reassuring as these words are to us whom believe in Jesus, when our Lord actually spoke them, he wasn't talking to his followers to give them encouragement; rather he was speaking to his enemies. In the immediate context, he's talking to people who are trying to discredit his ministry and lead people away from him. This is Jesus responding to his critics and saying, "You can't have them. They belong to me, and I will protect them from the likes of you." Or to say it another way, these are not principally intended as words of comfort to calm the flock, no, these are *fighting words*. With them Jesus is warding off the wolves. He's telling his enemies that they don't have the strength to wrench from his hands a lamb that belongs to him.

That, however, doesn't mean the enemy will stop trying. Satan still roams about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, so that even the Good Shepherd must be ever vigilant if he's going to protect his sheep – which raises an important question. What exactly does Jesus mean when he says that "no one can snatch them out of my hands"? I mean, we've all heard of people – it's likely we know one or more – who once began the walk of Christian faith; but didn't continue in it. Somewhere along the way they gave up, they lost interest, they petered out, they wandered off into a life of unrepentant sin, or they became indoctrinated in the lies of the world or the soul-destroying teachings of one of the cults. How are we to understand a situation like that? If the enemy can't take a sheep from the hands of Jesus, how'd they get away? Are we to infer that the person in question was not one of Jesus' sheep – not a true believer – in the first place, even though they thought they were? And if that's true, how can you and I be sure that we really belong to Jesus? Or could it be that Jesus is overstating his ability to protect his sheep? In which case, what good is the promise? Obviously neither of these answers is very satisfactory. They only lead to more questions. And to more doubts because if it can happen that any sheep that belongs to Jesus can be lost, it means that it could happen to any one of us.

So, *what does Jesus mean when he says, "no one can snatch them from my hands"?* In order to answer the question, we have to know what the hands of Jesus are. My guess is that because the image of Jesus being the Good Shepherd is a biblical metaphor, most of us have the tendency to think of his hands in a rather abstract way.

That is, because Jesus is not literally a shepherd nor are we really sheep, we don't think of the Good Shepherd's hands in any concrete way. There's no substance there; it's just a picture to help us understand; right? The hold Jesus has on you is an ethereal sort of "woo – woo" spiritual force field that can't be seen or defined.

But that is the exactly wrong way to think of it. Jesus really does take hold of us. He has hands by which he accomplishes his work in this world. His hands are his Word. *That's* what he holds you with. By his Word he first took you and made you one of his lambs, and in his Word, he holds you even today. He says as much in the passage we heard: "My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me." Actually, because the tense of the verbs he uses denotes ongoing action, a more accurate translation would be "My sheep are ones listening to my voice" and "they are following me." So, to be in the hands of Jesus, you must be in his Word. You must be hearing it. You must be following the sound of his voice. *Then* you are protected. Then you are well fed. Then you grow to maturity. But stop listening, stop following, get out of his word or the range of his voice, and you get out of his hands. *Then* you become easy pickings for hungry wolves and lions.

All of this is highlighted in today's first reading from the Book of Acts. A little background here: the Apostle Paul is wrapping up his third mission trip to Asia Minor and Greece. He has spent the last three years working in and around the city of Ephesus, which is on the western coast of what is Turkey today. And rather than think of him as working with a single congregation all this time – the church at Ephesus – a more accurate description of what he's been doing is planting many individual congregations throughout the city and the surrounding towns and villages. And in these congregations, he has placed pastors, men that he has been training to continue the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments after he leaves. So he's been running a seminary, an intensive course of study with men who are learning on the job, taking God's Word that they are hearing from Paul and teaching it to the congregations they are serving.

Okay, so the time has come for Paul to leave and return to Jerusalem. He takes a quick jaunt up and around the Aegean Sea to revisit many of the churches he planted on earlier mission trips at places like Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth. These visits completed, he heads east toward Jerusalem – which takes him near Ephesus again. And so he calls together all the pastors he has been working with for the past three years for some last words of wisdom and encouragement. He knows that his own future looks bleak. Prison and other hardships await him on account of the Gospel, so that he's certain he won't be passing by this way again. So, what we have are his final instructions to his dear students who are going to be on their own from here on out. They'll be facing their own trials and hardships on account of the Gospel. Paul knows this. So, you'd better believe that what he tells them is what he thinks is the most important lesson of all.

And the first thing he does is to remind them of the example of his own ministry among them. "What have I been doing? You yourselves know that with all humility I've been steadily teaching, proclaiming the whole counsel of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I've been teaching Jews and Greeks, in your homes and in public; and I didn't stop even in the face of opposition and the plots of our enemies. That's what I was called by the Lord Jesus to do. And my only prayer is that I may be able to continue

doing it until I've completed the ministry he gave me to testify to the Gospel of God's grace in Christ."

"And therefore" he says, "my hands are clean. I am innocent of your blood." It seems a rather strange thing to say until you understand that he's referring to a passage in the book of the prophet Ezekiel. In it the Lord appoints Ezekiel to be his spokesman, and he tells him, "You must give the sinner my message to repent and turn from his way. If you fail to give him my Word, he'll die in his sin; but I'm going to blame you. His blood I will require at your hands. If, however, you warn the sinner and he refuses to repent. He'll still die in his sins; but you will be innocent of his blood."

So what Paul is saying is that by tirelessly teaching the whole counsel of God to people whether they wanted to hear it or not, he has discharged the duty of an under-shepherd of Christ. All the evangelist can do is preach, teach, and confess the whole truth of God. The implication is that's what these men must now be about if they are to keep their own hands clean. And this is the warning he gives them: "Therefore pay careful attention [first] to yourselves and [then] to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has placed you as overseer."

And the sequence here is vital. The pastor, as the under-shepherd of Christ, must never forget that he too is one of Jesus' sheep. This means that even the pastor is first and foremost always a student – a hearer – of God's Word. If ever he begins to imagine that he knows it all or well enough that he doesn't need to be listening himself to the Words of Jesus, he's sunk. And while this has always been a danger, I think it's especially a problem today. As a pastor I'm constantly being bombarded by advertisements for books, classes, and conferences that promise to make me more successful at what I do. They all talk about growing your church and expanding your ministry with their various programs, by learning their new leadership techniques, and by doing such things as updating the church's music, and its services to certain special interest groups like youth, older adults, couples, singles—what have you. And it's tempting to be sucked into thinking, "Yeah, that's what I need. That ought to help me pack the pews and make this church grow." But the trouble with all of this stuff is that while they sometimes pay lip service to the Word of God, the main focus is always on their "guaranteed" programs and techniques. The result is that the pastor who gets involved spends less time listening to the Good Shepherd and more time listening to these self-proclaimed "experts". And you can be sure of this: if the pastor is not keeping himself in the hands of the Good Shepherd by listening to his Word, he's not going to be able to lead anyone else there either.

And that leads to another problem that Paul raises. He says, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." He's speaking of the teachers of false gospels that followed in Paul's footsteps wherever he went. I'll come back to that in a bit. But still addressing the pastors he goes on to say, "And from your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away disciples after them." This is a second temptation endemic to the pastoral office: to make the ministry more about the minister than it is about Christ. When it happens, the congregation becomes his own personality cult. They adore the pastor because of his charm, his dynamic character, and the entertaining stories he tells. They come to hear the pastor rather than to hear from Christ. They seek his approval rather than the approval of Jesus. And make no mistake: it's pretty heady stuff. There's a desire in all of us to be needed, to be admired, to be respected for who I am rather than for the Christ I

am here to deliver. It's an easy trap for a pastor to fall into. But again, when a pastor does, he's gathering followers for himself, not for the Lord who called him.

And I say this to you because part of your duty as a member of the church is to keep your pastor in line – me and anyone else that may serve as your pastor in the future. You have a right to demand that your pastor remain a sheep who is continually listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd. And you have a right to demand that your pastor give you the Words of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus; that he teach you, and explain to you, and illustrate for you the whole counsel of God, in public and privately. That's what he's been called to do. And you must ensure that he does it, for in this way you remain in the hands of the Good Shepherd.

And that's important because, as we saw earlier, the wolves are coming. Of course, they rarely look like wolves. They almost always disguise themselves in sheep's skins so that it requires close scrutiny to tell the difference. And that's why I, like St. Paul, admonish you even with tears at times, to be careful about what books you read and which ministries you listen to. There are a lot of very popular authors of spiritually themed books and there are many television and radio ministries that seem on the surface to be good and faithful to the Word of God; but upon closer examination show themselves to be critically flawed. Some are worse than others; and some have problems that are quite subtle and hard to detect. It's only by continuing to listen very carefully to the voice of the Good Shepherd speaking through his Word that the imposters are revealed for what they are. We have to be wary. It's a dangerous world out there.

All of which leads me back to where we began: the need always to be in the hands of the Good Shepherd for there we are safe both in time and eternity. And the hands of Jesus are in the proclamation of his Gospel. That's how he holds us in his firm embrace. It is also the green pasture to which he leads us where we find food for our hungry souls. And there too we find the quiet waters of Baptism in which he first made us his own, and to which we return daily for cleansing through the confession of our sins and the Word of his forgiveness. And from there he leads us to the Table he has set before us in the presence of our enemies. It's the Table of his ongoing feast of Holy Communion, where our cup overflows with the blood of the new covenant shed to give us forgiveness and life. Even while all hell rages against us and the wolves are snapping and snarling, nothing and no one can stop us from receiving his body broken for our sin and his blood shed to give us new life.

St. Paul finished his last message to the pastors in and around Ephesus by commending them to the hands of the Good Shepherd, that is, the Word of his grace. And that seems an appropriate place for me to end this message too, because that is what is able to build you up in holy faith and give you the inheritance with all those who are saints of God in Christ. Remain in Christ's Word and you remain safe in his hands from which no one can snatch you away. And then his goodness and mercy shall surely follow you all the days of your life, and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***