

John 10:11-18

It's a tough world out there for a sheep. So many predators. So much danger. What is a sheep to do? It has no means to defend itself. It's not equipped to engage in battle against a wolf. You will never see a sheep standing victoriously over a wolf it has just killed. The sheep will lose every time. This is why sheep do not live in the wild. They are domestic animals. Without a shepherd to care for them sheep will not survive.

When Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd, you realize of course, that makes you a sheep. And as we said, it's a tough world out there for a sheep. How has it been going for you?

We might be quick to answer, "Oh, pretty good." But I wonder how accurate that response would be. Sheep, you see, tend to look at things from the point of view of...a sheep. And I suppose we can't help it, because that's what we are. Sheep don't stop being sheep, and shepherds don't stop being shepherds. But sheep can be grazing merrily in a pasture believing everything to be fine and dandy, and yet totally unaware of the wolf sneaking up on them. So when I ask, "How's life going?" what we really want to do is not simply take a look around and say, "Fine." Because we sheep don't see very well—we don't see all the dangers and predators around us.

We see a roof over our heads, a car in the garage, a paycheck coming regularly, friends and family that we enjoy spending time with, recreation and hobbies that we look forward to. We think life is sailing along rather smoothly for us sheep. Oh, we have sicknesses to deal with, aches and pains in our joints, lack of sleep and hectic schedules, and we could always use more money. But all-in-all, life for us sheep is not bad. It could be worse.

Now I'm not your shepherd. Jesus is. I'm a sheep like you, but I'm also Jesus' undershepherd. And I have the privilege and responsibility to tell you how things look from the shepherds' point of view. And He sees all the hidden dangers. He sees the wolf coming long before we know it's there. It's not, "If" He sees the wolf coming—it's "when," our text tells us. It's a given. Wolves attack sheep. They always have and always will. Not just for fun—they attack sheep in order to devour sheep. It's what wolves are good at. They're built for attacking—sharp teeth and claws, fast, ferocious. They don't faint at the sight of blood. They'll sink their teeth right into a sheep. And the sheep may never see it coming until it's too late. That's why sheep need a shepherd. A shepherd to warn them, and a shepherd to defend them—and that's what you have in Jesus.

And here's your warning: the wolf is after you. No, not the person sitting in the pew next to you—he's after you. He'd like for you to think that he already has a full stomach, but be warned—he never stops hungering for sheep. Sheep are the only thing he eats. And he's hungry for you and for your children.

Now if this kind of talk bothers you, there are plenty of churches out there you could go to where you will not be warned. They don't want to "upset" the sheep. The sheep, they feel, should stay happy and content. No wolf talk—that only agitates the sheep. But if I did not warn you about the wolf, I would be just a hired hand who cares nothing for the sheep. The hired hand ignores the wolf and even runs in the opposite direction. But that's not what

Jesus does. He is your Shepherd who loves you. And through His undershepherd He warns you about the wolf.

And don't think that the devil will show up looking like a big, bad wolf. Rather, he will look like a wolf wearing sheep's clothing—an "angel of light," the Bible says—someone harmless, something fun. The television show that portrays witches helping people is a wolf in sheep's clothing. The book and movie that tells you that the DaVinci code is right and Jesus is wrong is a wolf wearing sheep's clothing. Your friend who encourages you to go fishing or hunting on Sunday morning is no friend, but someone being used by the wolf with sheep's clothing.

We sheep don't see any harm in wandering away from the Shepherd, as long as it's not too far away. Be warned. The wolf will snatch you. He is smarter than you. He is more powerful than you. He is cleverer than you. And he's not half-way around the world—he prowls Augusta day and night. He never sleeps. But neither does your Shepherd.

"I am the Good Shepherd," says Jesus. What makes Him so good? He delivers you from the wolf. These verses today that form our text, (John 10:11-18), are entirely the words of Jesus. And in these eight verses there is a phrase Jesus repeats five times. Do you know what it is? These words: "I lay down My life for the sheep." Five times your Good Shepherd tells you that He lays down His life for you.

And that is how He delivers you from the wolf. He didn't just lay down His life; He laid it down in the jaws of the wolf for you. Jesus did not run in the other direction when He saw the wolf coming. He ran straight toward the wolf. The wolf who is after you—Jesus threw Himself into his bloodthirsty jaws—and so the wolf devoured Him. To deliver you, Jesus laid down His life for you. He died the death you should have died. He suffered the agony you should have suffered. He bore the pains of hell you should have borne. When Jesus went willingly to the cross, He went there to be devoured by Satan, who always threatens Jesus' sheep. He went there to die.

But Jesus did not stay dead. The jaws of the wolf could not keep Him. Jesus burst out of death's grasp and rose in victory on Easter morning. And I'm here to tell you that Jesus gave that wolf a death-blow. He made a mess of that wolf by bursting out of its clenched jaws. And that wolf, therefore, cannot harm you if you stay with your Good Shepherd. The wolf cannot touch Jesus anymore. It's afraid of Him. Jesus defeated the wolf already. And so when you stay with your Good Shepherd, the wolf cannot come near to snatch you and devour you.

And so when Jesus tells you, "I am the Good Shepherd," He is not telling you this to inform you. He's telling you so that you stay near Him. The wolf has not gone away. He prowls all around us, and he's mad. Jesus' victory for you made Satan angry. And he is ever so determined to snatch you and devour you.

Do not fear. Your Shepherd is near. He is as near as His Word and Sacraments. Jesus does not tell you to come to church and to receive the Lord's Supper just as a command to follow. But it's because in these holy things your Good Shepherd draws you near to Himself. He knows the wolf is after you. He knows that His sheep like to wander. And so

Jesus is always calling out to His sheep, through the voice of His undershepherd, to stay near to His Word and Sacraments. For it is here that He keeps you safe from the wolf.

It's a tough world out there for a sheep. That's why we stay with our Good Shepherd within the safety of His sheepfold, His Church. Is life perfect in here? No. The only perfect thing in here is our Good Shepherd and His perfect Word and Sacraments. We're a bunch of sinful, stinky sheep. And you know how stubborn sheep are. We'll bicker with each other. We'll walk all over each other. Life can be pretty tough even here within the Church of our Good Shepherd.

But Jesus is here with us. And He knows His sheep. And He forgives His sheep. He forgives you. He forgives you for fighting with each other. He forgives you for wandering away from Him. He forgives you because He is not just a shepherd—He is your Good Shepherd who lays down His life for you. And that makes you not just any old sheep—you are Jesus' sheep. You are the forgiven sheep of Him who is your Good Shepherd. Amen.