**John 10:11-18 April 25, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Gospel lesson, John chapter 10 here re-reading these words. “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.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Shepherd, hired hand, wolf and sheep. These are the images of Good Shepherd Sunday; a special Sunday of the Church Year where we see a powerful illustration of Jesus Christ and his care for His Church. Here we see the Greek ego eimi or the great “I AM” to describe him as the Old Testament term for God and a characteristic or definition of his title as the Christ. While other times we hear of the great I AM, as in I AM the way, the truth, and the life. or I AM the vine and you are the branches, this particular I AM sticks out because we devote a whole Sunday to it. It’s so powerful that we find this image not just in the Gospel of John, but scattered throughout the Bible in Ezekiel, in Isaiah, in Psalms and other places too. This is a special Sunday, a victorious and celebratory Sunday that falls in this season of celebration, and one where we get to see the difference between two types of leaders. On the one side we see the hired hand, and his disdain and laziness in caring for and taking care of the sheep. On the other hand we see the Good Shepherd, who cares for the sheep, provides for the sheep, and ultimately loves the sheep so much, that he willingly lays down his life for their protection.

But is it fair to see ourselves as sheep? It may not be our first choice when we define ourselves as God’s children, but to be honest, we don’t really get to choose what we are in relation to God. After all, God is the one who has created us, who has redeemed us, who has sanctified and set us apart. God is the active presence in our lives, He is the one who does all of the choosing and deciding, and in that sense, well, we are sheep. Our identity as Christians is that of one that is in constant need of leadership and direction. This is proven in many ways in our lives. For starters we know this from a proper understanding of our condition when are born into this world. Surely we are sinful from birth, sinful from the moment we are conceived in our mother’s wombs. That sin brings separation from God and also has corrupted our hearts to yearn for sin and lawlessness. Also we know from the words of Isaiah 53:6 – “We all like sheep have gone astray, each one of us going our own way” There we see a description of that yearning and following after our own sinful desires. And even if our original sin, or the words of the Prophet don’t strike you, you can’t ignore the words of David in the famous Psalm 23. For if the Lord is truly our shepherd, than we are his sheep. And if we understand those roles in this Psalm, than that means that we are the ones who are walking through the valley of the shadow of death. And if that is the case, then we need direction, we need leadership, and we need a shepherd to come and care for us so that we do not wander off and be snatched by the wolves.

The wolves are easy to understand in this illustration of Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd. Just look at the depictions of Satan throughout Scripture and we’ll see that this certainly isn’t the first time we’ve described him in the same way as an animal or beast. From the very beginning we see Satan as the serpent. And throughout Scripture we see him depicted as a Lion stalking their pray, as the beast and the dragon as he is depicted in the book of Revelation, and here we see him as the wolf. What’s the one thing that the shepherd and the wolf have in common? The sheep. On the one hand the Good Shepherd seeks to lead the sheep, care for the sheep and provide for the sheep so that the flock stays alive and grows stronger. On the other the wolf wants to distract the sheep, scatter the sheep, snatch the sheep away from the protection of their fellow sheep and the shepherd, and ultimately destroy the sheep by tearing the flock apart.

The danger is real. The wolves are out there, and we don’t have to hear them howling at the moon to know that they exist. We live in a world of wolves, where Satan and his demons have influenced people to become persecutors of Christians and the Church. Ultimately these people want nothing more than to see the flock of God’s chosen people scattered and torn to bits.

So where does the hired hand fit in? Well, the hired hand is the one that the Good Shepherd is directly comparing himself to. While the enemy of the Good Shepherd are the wolves, and the primary job of the Shepherd is to care for the sheep, the hired hand is the one that attempts to do the work of the Good Shepherd. The Hired hand is the one who is a placeholder, almost like putting a Band-Aid on a gushing wound or a piece of tape on a leaky pipe. The hired hand is a mercenary of sorts, one that is there for their own interests of getting paid or taken care of for the least amount of work. Because as Christ himself says in this Gospel reading, once the hired hand sees the enemy of the flock coming, they flee. They don’t show a genuine love or care for the sheep, they only serve their own interests.

While it is true that we live in a world of wolves let me today promise you, that we also live in a world of hired hands. We live in a world of leaders and prophets who appear to be like the Good Shepherd and may even speak or seem to be as our Savior is, yet they are only serving their own self interests. The hired hand is really only seeking after the comfort level of the sheep. So the hired hand doesn’t ruffle any feathers. The hired hand may claim to love the sheep and care for the sheep, but the hired hand won’t protect them from their enemies. The hired hand shows a superficial care for the sheep, but doesn’t care about their ultimate wellbeing.

We are surrounded by hired hands, in the form of false prophets and false leaders. We sadly take on the role of a hired hand in our own lives when we fail to confess the true beliefs of what it means to be a Christian. Because comfort is always easier than the truth. It’s easy to tell someone that you love them and agree with everything they say. But true love doesn’t always mean happiness. True love is about protection, and is about care. It’s taking into consideration the wellbeing of someone and telling them the dangers of what they’re doing. A hired hand wouldn’t think twice of a sheep putting their own lives into danger, and sadly, in our own lives, when we fail to call others to repentance, and when we ourselves become comfortable with our sin, we are sinning in the same way. We aren’t reflecting the love of the Good Shepherd.

What does the Good Shepherd do? Well, Jesus says it plainly. While other depictions of Christ as the Good Shepherd show him as not just the Shepherd, but also the Lamb or not just the Shepherd but also the door of the sheep, this is the simplest understanding. “I am the good shepherd” Jesus says meaning that the Good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” What does this mean? Well, very simply this as John puts it in His own Gospel 5 chapters later in the words of Christ “Greater love has no one than this that someone lay down his life for his friends”. What is love? Self-sacrifice. A sacrifice of comfort, of joy, and even a personal acceptance of pain and suffering all for the wellbeing of someone else. A hired hand may say that they love the sheep, yet their actions say otherwise. When the wolves come, they run away. But the Good Shepherd doesn’t just say that He loves us, His sheep, but he shows it. He showed it in his submission to the Will of His Father by becoming man on our behalf. He shows it in his sweat and in his journey throughout the world, revealing to the world that the Kingdom he’s bringing isn’t for earthly happiness, but is for their true need, which is the destruction of that sin that has influenced them from the day they were born. And ultimately he shows His love for us by dying. By suffering, and by laying down his life for us, so that the wolf would never have any power over us.

The reason this particular Sunday appears in the Easter season, is because of the powerful testimony and proclamation of Christ here at the end of our Gospel lesson. “Because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” No one coerced Jesus to be our Good Shepherd and defend us from our greatest enemy, He did it on his own power. And while he willingly submitted himself to death, he did not stay dead. He rose. He took up that Shepherd’s staff again when he rose from the dead and lives forever. He remains our Shepherd. We remain his sheep. But rather than being mindless animals, we are sheep that have been taught of the wondrous things that the Shepherd has done, and still does for us.

For Jesus still leads us beside still waters, He still takes us to the plains and the grazing lands of this world by providing for us all the needs of our body. He has provided for us all that we have, our body and soul, eyes ears and all our members, our reason and all our senses and still takes care of them as Martin Luther writes in the explanation of the First Article of the Creed. In the same way that a sheep has nothing outside of their shepherd, we have nothing and are nothing outside of the love and care of our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ. Which leads us to live lives of thanksgiving to him. We don’t need to fear that the wolves will snatch us away from Christ as we would the hired hand. We don’t need to live lives of fear that the Good Shepherd will hold this amazing gift over our heads, or that our service is payment for what He has done. We have the comfort and peace of knowing that the lives that we live are ONLY in thanksgiving to God for his care for us as His redeemed people and his beloved flock.

Which is why Paul writes in our Epistle lesson that by Christ’s sacrifice for us, “We know love that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” Very simply what he’s saying is that “We love, because he first loved us.” With what kind of love? With a self-serving and comfortable love that the hired hand would show to anyone only to suit their own needs? No. We love with a self-sacrificial love. We love with a real love, a solid and concrete love. An educated love that comes from the truth that is spoken of in the Scriptures. A love that has been revealed to us by the work of God’s own Son Jesus Christ. A love that transforms and reminds us of our identity as God’s own children.

God be with you as you go forth this day, into the world of wolves and hired hands with the cross both upon your forehead and your hearts, marking you as redeemed members of God’s holy flock.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.