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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/29/2012, The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹²He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. (John 10:12, RSV)

And so it is that the hireling lives to fight another day¹. The Good Shepherd is braver than the hireling, that's for sure, and in this sermon, I mean to praise the Good Shepherd. But let me begin with a word or two of sympathy for the hireling. After all, I like working men and women. I like to stand up for them.

The man might have had a family at home depending on him. He gets up at dawn, and Mrs. Hireling makes breakfast for him. He slips into the bedroom and kisses the cheek of his little daughter who is still asleep. He has much to live for. He heads off to work. The village flock of sheep is waiting in the sheepfold near the edge of town. The hireling is not a thief! The townsfolk entrust the flock to him. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him as a trustworthy man.

The sheep trust him too and they follow him. He is no stranger to them, else they would flee from him. But no fleeing here: the sheep follow him because they recognize him. The tones of his voice are familiar to them. They have followed him before, many times, and have done well enough. He has led them to water in otherwise arid land. He has found them shade against the scorching sun. He has led them to green pastures. None of these things could the sheep have done for themselves. They are just sheep -- innocent and good, but almost brainless creatures, with no fangs, no horns, and no homing instinct. Left to themselves, they simply wander, uselessly. They seem unable to smell water, or to intuitively follow the curves of the land moving ever downward toward the creek. They just wander about, till they fall off a cliff or fall down from exhaustion.

But not these sheep. They are led by the hireling, and *ordinarily*, they are safe enough.

But these are not ordinary times, for a wolf is at hand. I would not like it if a big dog launched himself at my throat. Some dogs are trained to do it. But a wolf doesn't need to be trained. He can attack on his own initiative, especially if he is hungry and determined. He is as big as a big dog, and his muscles have that

¹ Credit for this thought goes to Scott Black Johnston in *The Lectionary Commentary, The Gospels*, page 528.

steel-cable-like strength that wild animals have. The hireling is not naïve. He knows the danger. He knows what a big, bad wolf can do.

So, he flees. He lives to fight another day. He lives to go home to his family. Maybe his reputation as a hireling is done, and he will have to work now as a farm hand or an assistant carpenter or something. But at least, he lives, and he still has his chance to take care of his family.

Meanwhile, the flock is ravaged by the wolf. They have little chance against him without the protection of the hireling. They are not good at organizing themselves into a circle surrounding and protecting the lambs. They are not good at coordinating their weight and strength to try to turn away the wolf. No, they just scatter, every man for himself, and in the scattering they are picked off according to the leisure of the wolf. The hireling is okay, his family is okay, but it is a disaster for the flock.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Now, let's turn to the Good Shepherd. In the eyes of the flock, he is akin to the hireling in the sense that they are ready to follow him. He leads the way, and they follow on with him. They recognize the tones of his voice. They have followed him before and done well enough. They will follow him today too.

Only this day turns out not to be an ordinary day. This day, the wolf approaches. If the sheep had the sense of danger that other animals have, the flock would be restless, for the wolf approaches. He moves from boulder to boulder. He progresses, moving ever closer to them. But the sheep do not notice him. They just go on their merry way, enjoying their green pasture.

It is the shepherd who notices the wolf. He is the one with the sense of danger. His ears have detected the shift in the bird songs. He has heard the alarm in the little critters. His eyes have scanned the landscape. There! He sees the wolf. He perceives the relentless progress of the wolf toward the flock. The crisis is at hand. If the shepherd stays, swinging his rod and his staff, trying to fight off the wolf, then the flock stands a chance. But if the shepherd flees, they are goners.

This shepherd does not flee. Why? Well, he is a *good* shepherd. These sheep are his own, and he does not mean to let them down. At the start of this chapter, John 10, we learn that the good shepherd knows each of his sheep -- knows them by name:

...the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (John 10:3, RSV)

He is not about to abandon these helpless creatures. They depend on him. To run away from them would be like ripping his own heart in half. He cannot

desert them. They might be nothing special. They might win no awards at the York County Fair. But they are *his* sheep, and he means to defend them to the end, even to the giving of his life if he must.

JOHN 10

This noble chapter, John 10, is not simply about sheep, shepherds, and wolves. Above all, it is about the passion of our Lord Jesus. Jesus compares himself to a good shepherd. In this comparison, you and I occupy the role of sheep, which means that we are in need of his protection day and night. Indeed, we are entirely in over our heads compared to the wolf approaching, bounding forward from one boulder to the other. Indeed, we are entirely overmatched compared to our enemy the Devil, who is more like a lion, mightier and fiercer even than the wolf:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: (1 Peter 5:8, KJV)

We would be lost, we would be ripped and torn and cast aside if a Champion did not fight at our side. And in this John Chapter 10, Jesus resolves that he will not abandon his flock. He will not flee from you and me, though profound danger approaches both the flock and the shepherd.

Same as the hireling, the good shepherd has reason to want to live! Breath is sweet in the lungs, not only for the hireling but also for the good shepherd. And it would be just as nice to avoid the fangs of the wolf for the shepherd as it is for the hireling. In either case, it is pretty awful when the fierce wolf launches his fangs against the throat. Jesus surely did not want to die.

But he did, so that the flock could live. And he means to save the whole flock, for every sheep, every lamb among them is precious to him. If he must leave the ninety-and-nine to go out and search for the one lost sheep, he means to do so. For they are *his* and it would rip his heart in two to lose any of us.

BE A GOOD SHEEP

Now, let's consider two characters in this parable and apply them to ourselves: I mean, the sheep and the hireling. For in some ways, we are the sheep, and in some ways, we are the hireling. Let's begin with the sheep.

We have a Good Shepherd. He is Jesus Christ our Lord. He is risen from the dead, with life at his command, and in our Baptisms, he has pledged himself to be *our* Good Shepherd, late-born and far away as we are here in New York City in this year of our Lord 2012.

So, that is settled and trustworthy: In this dangerous world, you and I are not shepherdless, for we have Jesus Christ as our Good Shepherd. That is *his* part, to be our Good Shepherd and to love us to the very end. As for you and me, our part is to be good sheep.

The next time you have a meeting with a physician, attorney, or therapist, you might want to pray a little prayer that the physician will be a good shepherd and you will be *a good sheep* -- that the physician, attorney, or therapist will lead you to green pastures again, beside still waters... that this person will shepherd you toward health. His part is to shepherd, her part is to shepherd. Your part is to be a good sheep, concentrating on health, praying for the shepherd, and trying hard to take the medicine and do the work prescribed.

Even more so should we seek to be the good sheep of the Good Shepherd. There is no advantage for us in straying from him. There is no gain in wandering off. Departing from him exposes us to wolves, lions, cliffs, and exhaustion. It might not sound like a very high ambition for a human life, but, really, it is the highest we can have: Let us humbly follow him wherever he leads us. Let us be the good sheep of our Good Shepherd, walking in his ways, practicing his virtues, following him in his life of love for others.

THE HIRELING

Finally, let's revisit the hireling. He fled when the wolf approached and lived to fight another day. I have tried to speak sympathetically of him, but really, what he did was pretty awful! It was awful for the sheep, for at least some of them were killed by the wolf and so could not live out their days to old age. But also it was awful for the owners of the sheep. Some of the townsfolk could probably afford to lose a sheep or two. They have enough prosperity that the loss of a single sheep is a setback for them, but not a devastating one. But, on the other hand, for some of the village folk, the loss of a single sheep is like the difference between life and death. They live so close to the edge that the loss of that sheep is like the final blow -- the blow that they might not survive. It might mean hunger, weakness, or even death for a child or an elderly member of that family. That is simply how things are in the real world. Much of humanity is so poor that the loss of an animal will work its way out toward death. When the hireling abandoned his flock, he struck a heavy blow against some of the families back home.

And the thing is, in various ways, you and I are the hireling. Few of us actually own the institutions or businesses for which we work. I serve this congregation, for example, but I do not own it. The physician does not own the hospital, the office worker does not own the business, the mail-delivery person does not own the post office, the fireman does not own the firehouse. But let it

be so! Let it be that many of us are hirelings. Nonetheless, we have people depending on us. We have duties in this world, and we should see to them.

Suppose the hireling in charge of the flock was not alone. Suppose the Good Shepherd accompanied him. Suppose the Good Shepherd stood at his side as the wolf came bounding toward him. Wouldn't that be better! Let the hireling know this: The Good Shepherd lives to fight at his side, perhaps in ways the hireling will not ever perceive, but which will permit the hireling to survive this fight and to live to fight another day. And if worse comes to worst, let the hireling know this too: If he fights the wolf and dies in the battle, the Good Shepherd at his side will raise him again someday, and all will be well with his family in the end.

And so it is with you and me too: The Good Shepherd stands at our side. Me in my pastor's study or visiting a sick person, and you in your life as workers in your various areas of responsibility: a Champion fights at our side. Should not this make us braver? Should not this make us better? A risen Conqueror fights at our side, even Jesus Christ our Lord, our Good Shepherd, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.