

Sermon Easter 4 2018

April 22, 2018

John 10:11-18

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

This week I was reading the Sherlock Holmes story “A Study in Scarlet.” Those of you who have read that might remember that the story ends up having some correlations to the migration of the Mormons to Utah in the middle of the 1800’s. It must have been with that in mind that I was reflecting on Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormons, in relation to Jesus’ words for this morning when He said, **“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.”** I made this connection because I remembered reading years ago about the life of Joseph Smith and the origin of the Mormons. In particular, I remembered that there were several occasions over the course of the years where things would get difficult, when wolves would come, and Smith would have a reason for having to leave the people behind. In fact, if I remember one specific biography made the point that he would often then return with a new revelation that would change the game for how things worked for the fledgling band. This questionable character even reflected itself in his death which has been revised to describe martyrdom, but from witnesses seems to have been more of a gunfight at the OK Corral.

Why do I bring this up? I bring it up because what we see is that this is not Jesus’ M.O. Jesus makes it clear that He is not the hired hand. He makes it clear that when the wolf comes, He doesn’t flee. He makes it clear that He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep, for you His blessed flock. And as we reflect on what He has done, we see how true this is.

And think about the contrast. Why does the hired hand come to watch the sheep? Is he there because the sheep mean anything to him? No. Is he there because he has affection for them? No. He’s there to collect his paycheck. He’s there to put food on his table for himself, and maybe for his family. He might be working there so that he can perhaps have his own land and flock someday. But when push comes to shove what motivates him? The money. So, when he’s out with the sheep in the middle of the night, and it’s cold and rainy, and the wolf comes out to stalk the sheep, what is his perspective? Does he care that much if the sheep are devoured?

Absolutely not. He'll go out there another time when there's no danger. Or if worst comes to worst, he'll find another land owner to herd for.

But not the Good Shepherd. That's exactly the opposite of what He's done. Think about it. There Jesus was, He was in the comforts of His Heavenly abode, He was there in its purity, its holiness, in all its glory. And yet what did He do? He saw that attack of the wolf upon His flock and He left that comfort and He entered into the wretched brokenness of this world of sin, and He lay down His life for His Sheep.

And most appallingly, He did this willingly, when we were even enemies. Hear again what He says, **"For this reason the Father loves me, 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. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again."** Did you hear that? Our Lord has the authority to lay His life down, to set it down. No one forces Him to do it. The Father didn't come to Him and say, "Hey listen Jesus, I know you don't want to do this, but if you don't you'll be in trouble with me." The Father didn't say, "Jesus if you would do this, I'll give you a great reward." Yes it's true that Christ receives all authority in heaven and earth by virtue of this, but it's not as though that was the carrot dangled in front of Him. No! Think about what the writer to the Hebrews says, "For the joy set before Him." He did this because His joy was our salvation. He saw your state in under the attack of the wolves, and He stepped forth.

And as I say that, apparently the wolf was considered especially feared in the ancient world. The wolf was immense in its strength. The wolf was unmatched in his wile and cunning. The wolf was insatiable in his appetite. He would sneak upon unsuspecting victim after unsuspecting victim and devour prey after prey. And Jesus saw the wolves attacking you, the wolves of your sin, of death, and of the devil, and as He saw that, what did He do?

He stepped in their path and died to protect you from them. Sin has tried to devour you, but can't. Death tries to consume you, but can't. The Devil would deceive you, but has Christ Himself crushing His head. Christ crushes them even though the wolf jumps on Him and goes for the jugular. And you see that jugular lacerated and the blood poured out on the cross. The cross which ultimately brings the death of the wolves: that brings the forgiveness overcoming sin, the resurrection overcoming death; and the mercy which overcomes the law the devil uses to accuse you as the great Satan, Accuser. Yes Christians, your Good Shepherd has loved you with an eternal love, baptized you and washed you, and He has made you His own. He has drawn you to His flock and fed you. All that you would be carried to His sheep pen in

His eternal care. All of this willingly on His part, not coerced, not demanded, but utterly of His own doing and authority. All because He has loved you with an eternal love.

As you think about then, it makes all of our experiences a little easier to take doesn't it? It takes the shepherding that He gives and make it sting a little less, doesn't it? In fact, I often reflect on that in relation to the 23rd Psalm. You know those are such rightly beloved words, and many Christians say them so often, but do we think about what they mean? Of course we think about the comfort of green pastures and still waters, the presence in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death. But do you think about the rod and staff as comforting?

Meditate on that for a second. The rod and the staff of the shepherd as a comfort? What does the shepherd do with the rod and staff? Well, with the crook, he snags the sheep back into the fold, and with the rod, he smacks the sheep to keep them in line. That doesn't sound comforting does it? Getting dragged around by a hook, and getting smacked to stay in line, that doesn't sound in line with what the Psalmist is saying, does it?

So what does it mean? Well, why is the shepherd doing that? Because he's keeping the sheep where they are safe. He is keeping the sheep together for the sake of strength in numbers. He's keeping the sheep with the fold so that they can all enjoy sustenance without fear. He's keeping them in the flock so that they don't wander off and starve or get consumed on their own. Ultimately, he's directing them to the safety of the sheep pen where they can live another day, right?

In other words, what's his motivation? He's caring for the sheep. He's providing for them. He's protecting them. Does it hurt momentarily? Yes, but is it better than being out of the fold? Without question.

So, likewise our Good Shepherd does to you sometimes. Sometimes He whacks you with His staff and it stings. Sometimes, He drags you with His hook and it smarts. In other words, sometimes He comes to you and He says, "you are sinning." He says, "You are not trusting in me as you should and that is wrong." He tells you, "You are greedy for that which is not yours, you are not as generous as you should be, you are selfish and self-centered, stop it." He tells you your sin and it hurts. He tells you are not good enough to earn a place in His Kingdom, that no one is. He tells you, that there are many who will not be in His Kingdom. He tells you that and it doesn't feel good. Likewise, you know that crack of His staff when you sin and there are earthly consequences. You lash out in anger and lose your job. You make offhand comments

and offend your family. You harm your neighbor and he harms you back. And all the more you know the struggle of the general consequence of sin, you know trials and suffering, pain and ultimately death, both of your loved ones and finally you will know your own death. This is all that law that He speaks, and it hurts.

But when it comes to you, Christians, you know your Good Shepherd. So, where does it come from with Him? It comes from His love. I remember realizing this very firsthand when my mom died. As I think you all have heard, I was in High School, I was fifteen, when my mom died. I so clearly remember not knowing what else to do besides turn to the Lord's Word. I had received a Bible from my mom for my confirmation the year before, and it was on my nightstand. I remember just over a week after she died, I happened to turn to Hebrews 12 where the writer to the Hebrews quotes the proverb that says that Lord disciplines those He loves and chastises those He accepts as children. He says that just as our earthly parents discipline us for our good, He disciplines us that we would share in His good, in His holiness. And so ultimately, as hard as it was, this was actually comforting. God was working something far greater than the temporary sadness: the joy of eternal holiness with Him. Those of you who are parents understand this. You might slap your child's hand to prevent them from touching the burner. It hurts them, but it's better than the burn of the element.

Christians, this is what our Good Shepherd does for you. Yes His rod and staff hurt, but in them He keeps you in the safety of His flock. He keeps you with Him. All the more, there He keeps you where you might see His hands pierced as the wolves attacked Him. Where you would see that His side was lanced for your salvation. Where you would see the cross upon which He set down His life, not as the hired hand who leaves when it gets tough, but the loving Good Shepherd who will even throw you upon His shoulder and carry you to those green pastures and still waters. Yes He is your loving Good Shepherd who has already led you to His still waters of baptism into His death and the life of His resurrection and fed you with His very own body and blood. And He has done all of this willingly. If He has done this don't you see that He loves you? He does, in fact He left Heaven itself to make you His own and carry you to His house forever. Amen.