

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Sunday after Ascension, May 20, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 334, 524:7, 528, 447, 46:3.

Lessons: Psalm 23, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 24:1-14.

Sermon Text: John 10:22-30

Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

Dear Friends in Christ:

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, the day Jesus ascended into heaven, from where he will come to judge the living and the dead. This reminds us of the approaching end of the world, and of Peter's words: "***The end of all things is near.***" (I Peter 4:7) Thinking of the end of the world surely would cause us to be fearful if it were not for one thing: We as believers in Christ have Jesus as our Savior and God as our dear Father. The Apostle Paul says of the Lord: "***He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.***" (I Corinthians 1:8)

In our text it is Jesus our Good Shepherd who speaks about His sheep having eternal life. As long as Jesus is our Good Shepherd and we are His sheep, we need have no fear of the end of all things. Rather, what He says fills our hearts with the greatest assurance and joy.

May the Holy Spirit give us that assurance and joy as we hear how

JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD SPEAKS OF HIS SHEEP

- 1. They are not those who remain in unbelief despite all the evidence of Jesus' words and works;**
- 2. They are those who listen to His voice and follow Him;**
- 3. They are definitely assured of eternal life.**

Our text tells us on what occasion Jesus spoke of His sheep. "***Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade.***" The Feast of Dedication, called Hanukkah in the Hebrew, was celebrated in memory of the rededication and cleansing of the temple after the wicked king of Syria had defiled it. It was celebrated for 8 days beginning in the early part of our month of December. As our text says, it was in the winter.

Jesus was walking with His disciples in the temple area called Solomon's Colonnade where there was some protection from the cold. Here it was that the Jews confronted Him. "***The Jews gathered around him, saying, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.'***"

As was usually the case with the unbelieving Jews, they challenged Jesus with their questions and accusations. Here they accused Jesus of holding them in suspense, of not telling them plainly that He was the Christ, the promised Messiah.

"Jesus answered, 'I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.'"

We need not waste time in taking up the accusation of the Jews who hated Jesus. As Jesus told them, the evidence that He was the Messiah was not lacking. Even though Jesus did not come out with public announcements letting everyone know that He was the promised Messiah, as a man in our day would take out advertisements announcing his candidacy for office, yet Jesus' miracles spoke for Him. Jesus had performed many miracles, and He had preached in such a way that people could know He was no ordinary prophet. When John the Baptist sent his followers to ask if Jesus were the Christ, Jesus said, "***Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf***

hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." (Matthew 11:4-5) There was no excuse for the unbelieving Jews. The evidence was overwhelming, but they rejected the evidence in unbelief.

Such unbelievers could not possibly be numbered with the sheep in Jesus' flock. Jesus' sheep have definite characteristics to identify them. Jesus says they are the ones who listen to His voice and follow Him.

2.

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." Let us be sure we understand who Jesus is talking about. Jesus' sheep all belong to the same flock of which He is the Shepherd. That one flock is the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints. That is the one saving Church. Jesus' sheep are the true believers, the people who put their trust in Him as both Lord and Savior.

The first definite characteristic to identify Jesus' sheep is this: **"My sheep listen to my voice."** Earlier in this chapter Jesus tells about the characteristics of sheep. He says they know their shepherd's voice, and He adds: **"They will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."** (John 10:3) Jesus' voice is heard when Jesus speaks His Word. The Word of Jesus is the Holy Word of God, the Bible.

Jesus' sheep, then, not only hear the Word of God outwardly. They listen to Jesus' voice. Since Jesus gave the command to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, millions of people have heard the Word of God. But only a few, comparatively speaking, have listened to it in the sense of accepting it by faith. Consider how many there are who find excuses for not gathering together to hear the Word of God. Consider how many go to some church but do not hear the Word of God there, but only the opinions of human reason. Consider how many do hear Jesus' Word, but do not accept it. That's why we say comparatively few people are members of Jesus' flock who listen to His voice.

The big question, of course, is not how many believers in Christ there are, but the big question is: Are we among them? Are we one of them? Do we really listen to Jesus' voice? It is His voice that we hear in these words: **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."** (Matthew 11:28) That's the precious invitation addressed to people who are bowed down with the burden of their sins. It is Jesus' voice which promises rest for the soul in the forgiveness of sins. It is also Jesus' voice we hear when David writes in Psalm 32: **"Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him!"** (quoted by Paul in Romans 4:7) It is Jesus' voice we hear when Paul writes **"that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ."** (Galatians 2:16) To listen to Jesus' voice means to believe all these precious truths of God's Word. Nothing can take the place of hearing Jesus' voice in the Word. We can't buy forgiveness of sins and eternal life with money; we can't earn it by our good works. It's ours alone through faith in Jesus. We must be one of His sheep who listen to His voice and accept by faith what He says.

Jesus says of His sheep: **"I know them, and they follow me."** Jesus the Good Shepherd is intimately acquainted with His sheep. Not only does the Lord know His sheep in a general way, but He knows each one of us by name and is intimately acquainted with all our needs. He has a loving concern for us. It is He who says to us in the Book of Isaiah: **"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine."** (Isaiah 43:1) To the unbelievers who will find themselves outside of heaven on the Last Day, Jesus says: **"I don't know you."** (Matthew 25:12) But Jesus says of His sheep: **"I know them."**

Another characteristic of Jesus' sheep is this that they follow Jesus. They follow Jesus by continuing in His teachings. Jesus says: **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples."** (John 8:31) Jesus' sheep follow Him by willingly accepting whatever He gives in this vale of tears, the bad days as well as the good days, the sorrows as well as the joys. Jesus' sheep also follow Him by suffering for His sake, for the sake of His Word. Peter writes: **"If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."** (I Peter 2:20-21) Following Jesus in enduring all the bad things of this life always ends in a blessing. For **"we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."** (Romans 8:28)

Of this we also hear in our text, as we learn that Jesus' sheep are definitely assured of eternal life.

Jesus says: ***"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no man can snatch them out of my hand."*** Do we hear our Savior's promise? He's going to give His sheep eternal life. Not reincarnation into some other kind of life on a sinful earth. But eternal life in heaven where there is no sin, nor any of the terrible results of sin, no sorrow, no sickness, no hunger, no thirst, and on the other hand no good thing will be lacking. Peter says that because of Christ's resurrection, we as believers have an inheritance awaiting us, ***"an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time."*** (I Peter 1:4-5) Those are words of Christian certainty.

Added to this we have the definite assurance of our Good Shepherd: ***"They shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."*** Jesus does not say that His sheep will not die and be put into a grave. But, as He told Martha at Lazarus' death, ***"He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."*** (John 11:23) Jesus' sheep will not suffer everlasting death in hell.

That is not to say that there are no dangers, no threats, or no evil forces working to snatch us out of Jesus' hand. The devil is described in the Bible as our enemy, who ***"prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."*** (I Peter 3:8)

Nor should anyone become careless about sin and think that he cannot fall away from God's grace. God's grace is not cheap so that we can sin as we please because we think that God will always forgive us anyway. Paul warns: ***"So, if you think you are standing firm, 'be careful that you don't fall!'"*** (I Corinthians 10:12) It is possible to believe for a time and then fall into unbelief. In the parable of the Sower, Jesus says of some hearers of the Word: ***"They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away."*** Luke 8:13

The certainty of salvation taught in our text is this: As long as we cling to Jesus in faith, no one can snatch us away. Our confidence and certainty is not in ourselves, but in Christ. He says in our text: ***"My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."*** God the Father and Jesus His Son are one God, not one in person, but in essence. They are two separate persons, but one in essence, one in power and all other divine attributes. Jesus has unlimited power, just as the Father and Holy Spirit. We can put all confidence and certainty in this promise of Jesus, therefore, when He says: ***"They shall never perish."*** May we, therefore, say to Jesus: "I am trusting Thee, Lord Jesus, Trusting only Thee; Trusting Thee for full salvation, Great and free." Amen. (The Lutheran Hymnal 428, v.1)

(This sermon has been edited and reprinted from the November 13, 1983, Ministry By Mail.)