**John 10:22-30**

At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, **23** and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. **24** So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” **25** Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, **26** but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. **27**  My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. **28**  I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. **29** My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. **30**  I and the Father are one.”

**“Hand Off My Sheep!”**

 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Since celebrating Easter lasts seven Sundays, the fourth Sunday now marks the middle of the season. Of course, what happens when we get to the halfway point of anything in life? You have come so far, but what you see is still how far you need to go. At this halfway point, where the alleluias of Easter settle into a more ordinary sound, where springtime preparations easily distract, and where a risen Jesus starts to fade behind other concerns about life. It is fitting to find on this fourth Sunday of Easter nothing less than Jesus as the good shepherd. He stands out in the middle of this season as the One who cares and keeps His sheep safe.

 Now just as misconception can happen with Noah’s Ark when pictures portray a more playful vessel rather than a vehicle of deliverance from God’s judgment, the same goes with Jesus as the good shepherd and His sheep. Pictures often display this theme with an image more attune to the heavenly glory that St. John describes in Revelation. Certainly, the church triumphant is comforting, has no hindrances, and is safe from all distress. However, what we see with the church on earth, the church under the cross, is not cuddly sheep or a carefree shepherd. These are the ones admits the “great tribulation” where sin, death, and Devil surround the flock. Yet, Jesus the good shepherd will let nothing stand in-between Him and His sheep.

 Have you ever noticed the most comforting words of Christ come at the most dangerous times? The cross stands out as the fundamental place where this happens, but also in what we hear today. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” What Jesus says did not fall among friendly company, but just the opposite. The light of this good shepherd who is one with the Father exposed the darkness. Whether it be a religious place like the temple or a high time such as the Feast of Dedication, only Christ had a grip on salvation that was not going to fade or falter.

 Separation is the problem we keep facing in a sinful world. If Jesus is the good shepherd, what does this mean for His sheep? First, there are wolves. In other words, there is evil. Such darkness hungers for easy prey. Of course, like sheep, we stuff our faces with the grass or excess of this world. All the while, with heads down we go on unware the danger before us. How much have the wolves dragged us off into sinful pleasures, selfish addictions, and other idols that devour our life? Finally, when we see the wolves, fear takes over. Sheep run off to find shelter from every kind of shame, guilt, and sorrow.

 If wolves are not enough, false shepherds also cause separation. They claim all kinds of life, but it leads away from Christ the only hope for sinners. St. Paul had concerns over any who would change the office of pastor to be apart from the faithful Word and properly administered Sacraments. Doing so would turn sheep into food for other appetites. He stated, “Among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” This salvation works the sheep to death, seeks to win by the law, and even replaces faith with feelings. Sadly, apart from the good shepherd these other ways for life never end up saving any sheep.

 As much as there are plenty of dangers, the greatest comes in just being a sheep. This is why those at the temple rejected Jesus. They saw such a title as weak and helpless for their life. Rather than rising up with strength, it meant trust in salvation outside of their hands. Those Jews at the Feast of Dedication were celebrating strength that took back the temple during tragic times. Yet, the hidden truth is no matter how great the victory in life, death takes all. We like to picture such things more for the weak and unhealthy, but Jesus would rather have us admit we are sheep. Apart from Him, the power of death leaves only disappointment that literally saps our strength.

 For the multitude of threats against life, one good shepherd is all the sheep need. Jesus calls out with His voice that comes from His love. This was the light in the darkness at that temple. Christ reached out plainly to those that denied Him. He lifts up the heads of His sheep to hear Him cry out against the evil around us. Rather than running off in fear over the wolves that dragged us into sin. He calls the sheep to Him by His sacrifice proclaiming, “It is finished.” The word of this good shepherd is what St. Paul preached to both Jews and Greeks proclaiming, “repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Only this Word calls back the careless and fearful, so that God delivers you out of your darkness.

 Where a false shepherd pretends to give life, Jesus knows us and promises life by His way of forgiveness. This is how there is one flock and one shepherd, beyond the divisions and tribulations at the present. Christ’s Church will never perish, since He rules among His flock with forgiveness He alone speaks. Different from working the sheep to death, this good shepherd gives life to the sheep by what He laid down by His sacrifice. Rather than a therapeutic talk about life, Jesus speaks it daily to His baptized saying, “My name has marked you.” False shepherds let the sheep die as food. The true shepherd knows you need His ministry by way of forgiveness. This victory feast of the lamb is also the shepherd who now feeds His sheep.

 As sheep, we now follow because Jesus is faithful to save. The façade of life in the hands of man only lasts for a time. David who had great strength, vast resources, and power as king saw how fleeting life was on his terms. God’s presence to save was hope at all times for, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Psalms 23:6). Those at the temple refused such goodness and mercy in the face of God’s Son, even when they had lesser glory than King David. Christ gives the guarantee following Him means He sees us through from start to finish. His sheep have salvation by His hands so that our weakness or doubt does not have the last say.

 In a world hostile to sheep, Christ calls out to us below to join the saints above to praise His saving Name. In a world where sheep are not so cute, Christ knows how to care with the food of forgiveness. In a world where sheep die, Christ leads the way out of this tribulation taking us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven. Halfway through the Easter season and what do we find that is not so ordinary? Jesus the good shepherd will let nothing stand in-between Him and His sheep. Amen. The peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.