

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2017
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Acts 20:28-32 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. 32 "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

"Sheep Need a Shepherd"

You can't read these words from Acts chapter twenty without realizing how personal this conversation is. The Apostle Paul is sharing a farewell message with Christian leaders from the city of Ephesus. And with anything that's deeply personal, it swings from completely absorbing to ridiculously uncomfortable. It's like the relationship of sheep to their shepherd. We love this name Jesus uses for himself. We can just picture ourselves frolicking freely in the pasturelands under the watchful eye of our Good Shepherd. We are all too aware of our tendency to wander away and get into trouble. So we are relieved to hear the voice of Jesus calling us, his persistence in searching for us, his firm embrace bringing us back to safety. And then, all of a sudden, it dawns on us. I'm a sheep. That's not a compliment. Not too bright. Not big or scary or ferocious. Completely helpless and defenseless. Bingo. If I am a sheep, then I am completely dependent on my shepherd. And that's exactly the point. Sheep need a shepherd.

And that brings us back to Paul and his fellow workers in the pastures of the Good Shepherd. A little background here shows us that Paul has real and genuine concern for his fellow believers. He had spent years with them. He patiently preached and taught. He kept at it when people flocked to him and when people abandoned him. He put power on display among the Ephesians. He found himself in the middle of a mob and falsely accused of inciting a riot. When he realized it was no longer safe for him to stay in Ephesus and preach the gospel, he moved on. But he never forgot about those people, those souls who had come into the flock of the Good Shepherd as a result of the Holy Spirit's work through his tireless efforts. And now he is wrapping up his mission trip and returning to Jerusalem. He knows he can't pass through the city gates of Ephesus. His emotional attachment to the people might prevent him from completing his journey or put his life at risk again. So he meets some leaders from Ephesus at a coastal rest stop within reach of the city. Paul doesn't know if he'll ever see them again this side of heaven. He knows things will probably get dicey in Jerusalem. He doesn't know if he will make any more mission trips. And he wants to leave some lasting instructions for the people so precious to him, fellow sheep of the Good Shepherd.

Paul wants these leaders of the church to share his heart. So he instructs them: **“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”** (Acts 20:28) In other words, the people they are serving need care. The leaders of the church need shepherding. Sheep need a shepherd.

Interesting history, isn't it? But you're probably wondering what it has to do with you. In this story, who am I? I'm probably not an apostle, like Paul. Does that make me one of the elders from Ephesus? Or one of the people back in Ephesus? Let's not get too bogged down in the details. If Jesus is your Shepherd, you need this words. The prescription Paul proposes for the Ephesian church leaders is the same one he lived by. A few verses later he even points to his own example. If Jesus is your Shepherd and you have a heart for other people, these words apply to you. If you are a neighbor or friend or coworker who is concerned about the spiritual welfare of those people who are special to you. If you are committed to doing what is best for people you love - if you are a mother or father, if you are a child or teacher, if you serve people in your church or most of your family doesn't go to church - then these words are for you. Why? Because Paul and the overseers in Ephesus and you all share something in common. We are all sheep under the Good Shepherd. And sheep need a Shepherd.

Here's where we remember that this sheep-Shepherd relationship is comforting and uncomfortable at the same time. If you care for other people, if you care about their spiritual welfare, Paul has something to share. He gives this instruction: **“Keep watch over yourselves...Be shepherds...be on your guard!”** (Acts 20:28,31) Before you can give anyone else your attention, you need to give attention to your own spiritual welfare.

It gets personal when people tell you what to do, what they expect from you, what you have to do to live up to some sort of standard that you didn't necessarily choose for yourself. It's annoying for people who are EMTs or nurses or doctors to have to keep taking classes and continue passing certifications. It's a pain when police and firefighters and soldiers have to pass physical fitness tests and score high enough on skills tests. It's annoying for them, but it's reassuring for people who depend on them.

For you, that means to see yourself as a sheep in the Good Shepherd's flock. Before giving attention to the spiritual welfare of others, pay careful attention to your soul. Before you work on the faults and flaws of others, turn to your Shepherd for forgiveness. Before you turn your attention to instructing others, make sure your faith is being fed. This isn't selfish or self-centered. Take care of yourself. Because you are no good to anyone else if you are in trouble. You might actually put someone in greater danger by trying to help them when you aren't healthy, knowledgeable and strong. You are a sheep. You need your Shepherd.

We have this tendency to shrug off responsibility when it feels uncomfortable and then shoulder responsibilities that don't really belong to us. It's not just our problem or an issue with Christians. It's a human tendency. We neglect the things we can control and get stressed out about nukes in North Korea or the unemployment statistics.

It's dangerous when we do it as sheep. The Apostle Paul tells us the reason for watchfulness: **"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock."** (Acts 20:29) There are really dangers out there. There are really dangerous spiritual predators ready to take advantage of spiritually weak, spiritually unhealthy, spiritually inattentive sheep.

If you are going to watch out for these vicious attackers, it helps to be able to identify them. So who are they? It's interesting to note that Paul describes these dangers from the outside and the inside. He follows up: **"Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them."** (Acts 20:30) This just echoes the words of Jesus to his disciples. When he sent out the twelve disciples, he wanted them to be realistic about the dangers: **"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves."** (Matthew 10:16) That doesn't stop him from sending them out. He just wants them to be aware of the dangers all around them. And spotting them won't be easy. Jesus warns: **"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."** (Matthew 7:15) They can be practically indistinguishable from true sheep.

So this seems like a general warning, rather than pointing out a specific error or threat. They won't be easy to spot. They won't announce their evil intentions. They might not even be aware they are the dangerous ones. But there is a simple test to determine if you are dealing with a wolf. Does this spiritual leader bring you to Christ or to himself? A false teacher will be more concerned about his own purposes and goals than about the actual welfare of God's flock. In every generation of the Christian church, leaders can easily begin to attract people and gather a following. But are they bringing sheep into the fold of Jesus or over to their own way of thinking? Are they satisfying a deep-seated need for approval and popularity or bringing sheep under the guidance and protection of the Good Shepherd?

Shrugging off your responsibility can be disastrous. Reluctance to pay attention to your own spiritual welfare can put your own soul at risk. Failure to sound the alarm for the people you care about can expose them to vicious wolves.

When you fail to take the danger seriously, see the serious work of your Good Shepherd. Jesus stepped in front of the danger for you. When you fall into thinking your spiritual welfare isn't such a big deal, see the extraordinary heroism of your Good Shepherd. When you shrug about the inconvenience of being careful enough to spot spiritual danger, see the deathly seriousness of Jesus putting his life on the line for you. When it doesn't seem like a big deal to spot wolves in sheep's clothing, see the price Jesus paid to make you his own. Jesus acquired your soul at the cost of his own blood. You are purchased by the blood of Jesus. You are worth dying for. Jesus gave his life for you.

Just take a moment to flip back through your own personal spiritual scrap book. Someone had an influence on you. Someone somewhere thought it was important enough to share Jesus with you. Maybe your father didn't do much parenting, but he made sure he dragged your butt to church every Sunday. Maybe you had a child who bugged you about taking her to Sunday school when you wanted to be sleeping in. Maybe it was a pastor who was so persistent, who wouldn't give up on you, wouldn't take no for an answer, kept coming down

until you either called the cops or agreed to study the Bible. That's what makes history personal to you. You are blessed because someone saw how important it was for you to be part of the Good Shepherd's flock. Sheep need a Shepherd.

The more I learn about Christ the Rock, the more I realize how blessed we are. Some of you remember fondly Pastor Else or Pastor Glende teaching you the faith or making the gospel so clear in a way you never knew before. Some of you saw Pastor Jim patiently and persistently serving people in need so he could share Jesus with them. But the name that keeps coming up isn't even someone who was a paid staff member. Some of you can recount the way Wally was there for you and kept bringing you to Jesus. That doesn't mean you always agreed with them. Maybe you didn't even get along with them. But those people brought you to Jesus, brought you closer to the Good Shepherd, made a lasting impact on you despite their own personal shortcomings. They just realized you were like them. They needed a Shepherd and so do you.

And that's where we get back to the instructions from the Apostle Paul. He says: **"So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."** (Acts 20:31) Are you ready? Are you up for the task? Can you be like the Apostle Paul and show this same dedication?

Of course not, that's why even Paul realized he wasn't the one responsible for the spiritual welfare of the Ephesians. He said: **"Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."** (Acts 20:32) Emergency care professionals need to understand where their responsibilities begin and end. An EMT will get in trouble if he tries to perform surgery. A doctor isn't responsible for chasing down a drunk driver. He knows his work. He is aware of the dangers. But in the face of all the danger and all the threats, he entrusts the safety and security of fellow Christians to the Good Shepherd himself. The Christian life is built on Christ. And Christian service is centered on leading others to Christ.

A few years ago I struck up a conversation with a hotel worker while I was attending a pastors' conference. She was all distraught about the Ebola outbreak. It was mainly confined to Africa, but she was convinced it was spreading across the ocean and had her in its crosshairs. God's sheep understand there are real dangers out there. As we try to shepherd other people, we want to be aware of the risks. But we have freedom and safety living under our Good Shepherd. Paul could commit the Ephesians to the care of God and his word of grace, because that's what works. God works in our lives and God works through the Gospel.

Under the care of your Good Shepherd is power. God uses his Word to build up. This isn't just a warm, pleasant feeling. God's Word brings you into a deeper knowledge centering on the will and character of Jesus. God's Word builds you up to withstand wolves and errors. The same power that builds and grows God's church brings it to maturity to protect it from errors and divisions. God working through His Word doesn't just build up. God gives you the inheritance won for you by Jesus. In Christ Jesus, under the care of the Good Shepherd is where you need to be. By the sacrifice of Jesus you are holy. As a sheep in His flock you learn

to recognize his voice more and more, follow him closer and closer. You know who you are in Christ and you have the boldness to press on in faith. Because you are a sheep who needs a Shepherd. Amen.