

May 8, 2022
John 10:22-30

Easter 4
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Lord, Take My Hand and Lead Me”

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

The boardwalk at Seaside Heights, New Jersey is one of the most popular spots along the Jersey Shore. It stretches for blocks and is filled with rides, food stands selling all sorts of non-healthy favourites, souvenir shops, salt-water taffy vendors, games of chance, and, of course, the beaches filled with sunbathers and ocean swimmers. The boardwalk was a magnet for people throughout New Jersey, and a favourite destination for my friends and me in our teenage years; but it was a very frightening place for me as a young child. The crowds and the noise of the boardwalk were scary for a small boy who could easily have gotten lost in these throngs of sun seekers; but these fearful memories are accompanied by one of my greatest memories of comfort and reassurance: being taken by the hand by my parents. It might have been my mom or dad, or both of them together, but being taken by the hand in that large crowd filled me with reassurance that I was not alone and that I need not fear, because as long as I was in the hands of my loving parents I could have the confidence that all would be well and that nothing would separate me from the people who loved me and would make certain that no harm would come to me. I was safe in the hands of those whose love for me was complete and unconditional.

Being in the hands of someone who loves and cares for you is a tremendous source of comfort, especially in frightening or uncertain times. It is a sign of great caring and intimacy, a gesture of support and reassurance that all will be well at times when nothing appears to be well. It may have been during our childhood when we found ourselves lost or separated from our families, only to be taken by the hand by a trusted adult and led to a place of safety. It may be when we have lost a loved one and find ourselves adrift in a sea of grief, only to be taken by the hand by a dear friend and led through our own “valley of the shadow of death.” It may be when we take the hand of our beloved in marriage, knowing that the person with whom we exchange vows will share our “joys and sorrows and all that the years will bring.” Being in the hands of one who loves us is our assurance that no matter what happens, *“all will be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”* (Julian of Norwich).

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is also known as Good Shepherd Sunday, when we celebrate one of the most beloved images of our Lord Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd, the one who *“calls them by name and leads them out ... the good shepherd [who] lays down his life for the sheep.”* (John 10:3-11). We celebrate our faith in the most beloved of psalms that declares that *“the LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want”* (Psalm 23:1). Unlike the unfaithful shepherds who do not care for or provide for the sheep, the Lord promises that under God’s shepherding care God’s people will be fed, protected, and assured that they are always in the loving presence of their true and eternal shepherd:

- *“I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the LORD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak ...”* – Ezekiel 34:14-16.

Today’s Gospel lesson is a continuation of the “Good Shepherd Discourse” in the Fourth Gospel. It takes place at the “festival of the Dedication,” which is the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, which celebrates the liberation of Jerusalem from the reign of the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes in 165 BC. The eight-day festival takes place in the Jewish month of Chislev (December) and is marked by the lighting of candles and rejoicing (*“Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev.”* – 1 Maccabees 4:59). While Hanukkah was not a major pilgrimage festival such as Tabernacles, Passover, or Pentecost, it was an occasion when Jesus was *“in the temple, in the portico of Solomon”* (John 10:23), where he is met by a crowd of Jewish temple authorities who ask him *“how long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”* (10:24). The question of whether Jesus was the Messiah came up frequently during the Feast of Tabernacles (*“Yet many in the crowd believed in him and were saying, ‘When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?’”* – 7:31). The crowds had debated this question among themselves, and now the authorities put the question directly to Jesus. A literal translation of their question is *“how long are you taking away our life?”* In modern Greek, this idiom means *“how long will you continue to annoy us?”* The request that Jesus speak “plainly” (*parresia*, also used in 7:4: *“If you do these things, show yourself to the world.”*) about his messiahship relates to Old Testament images of a “shepherd” as a messianic figure. His interrogators are

concerned with whether the Messiah is truly among them; they ask for an answer in plain speech, unlike the veiled, figurative speech in the Shepherd Discourse.

Jesus' response to his interrogators is to remind them that *"I have told you, and you do not believe."* (10:25). The authorities do not believe because they are trying to understand Jesus on their own terms, not on his terms (*"You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world."* – 8:23). The purpose of Jesus' ministry is to do the works God has given him to do (*"I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do"* – 17:4); "works" refers to Jesus' revealing activity as a whole. Jesus' actions bear witness to him, and the miraculous signs he performs disclose his identity and work (*"The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me."* – 5:36). The problem the authorities are having with understanding how Jesus' works connect to his identity as Messiah come from the fact that *"you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep"* (10:26). To "believe" is to belong to those who hear Jesus' voice and receive eternal life (*"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life."* – 5:24), but one cannot hear Jesus' voice unless one is given to him by God, for *"faith is the necessary condition and key to understanding Jesus and his revelation"* (Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV). It is only with the eyes of faith that one can see the truth discerning Jesus; it is this gift of faith that is bestowed on Jesus' followers when they are called by the Good Shepherd to become his sheep, those who believe in him and have a personal relationship with him.

- "Those who belong to Jesus, who hear and recognize his voice and follow him, have been given to him by the Father. Everything depends on God's initiative. God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (3:16-17). At the same time, the result of Jesus' coming into the world is that those who do not believe are subject to judgment (3:18-19)." – Elizabeth Johnson.

The parallelism between what Jesus says of himself and of God (the sheep are secure in the hands of each) underscores the fact that Jesus and God do the same work; what is true of the work of one is true of the work of the other. Jesus is the model shepherd, and no one will snatch from his hand the sheep that the Father has given him. This is because Jesus acts for the Father, and no one can snatch the sheep from the Father's hand:

- “I am God, and henceforth I am He; there is no one who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it?” – Isaiah 43:13
- “But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them.” – Wisdom of Solomon 3:1.

“No one will ever snatch them out of my hand” refers to the shepherd’s protecting of the sheep from harm (*“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.”* – Psalm 23:4). Jesus can so bless and protect his sheep because of his relationship with the Father, who is “greater than all else.” The Father draws disciples to Jesus and has given them to him as a gift (*“Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away ... And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.”* (6:37-39). The power and custody that Jesus has with respect to the sheep is the same as the Father’s, for *“what my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand.”* (10:29). Jesus gives explicit expression of this inseparable unity when he declares that *“the Father and I are one”* (10:30). Jesus and God are united in the work that they do; Jesus shares fully in God’s work. God gives life; Jesus gives life. God judges; Jesus judges. Jesus’ unity with God thus provides the answer to the Messiah question in 10:24; Jesus is both more than and other than the traditional expectations for the Messiah. His power is not that of a political liberator who will restore Israel; it is the very power of God. *“God shares with Jesus God’s eschatological power over life, death, and judgment”* (Gail O’Day). The relationship of God and Jesus is evidence of God’s love for the world. The wonder of the Incarnation is that God is available to the world in the person of Jesus; the world can see the works of God in Jesus and have access to God in ways never before possible: *“If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”* (14:7).

- “Jesus claims to know God as no human being has ever known God, to be one with God in will and work for the salvation of the world. Jesus’ acts of healing and giving life, his words of teaching, all demonstrate and embody the presence of God in the world.” – O’Day.

As the Father and Son are one, so they bind humanity to themselves as one (*“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.”* – 17:11). This unity that is communicated to believers is what prevents anyone from snatching them away from either the Father or Son; as Paul states confidently, *“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor things present,*

nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39).

- “The voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that liberates rather than oppresses ... It says, ‘You belong to me already. No one can snatch you out of my hand.’ Secure in this belonging, we are free to live the abundant life of which Jesus spoke earlier in the chapter: ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’ (10:10).” – Johnson.

The abundant life of which Jesus speaks is not necessarily about abundance of years, or in wealth, or status, or accomplishments. It is the abundance that is rooted in the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ, the blessings of our Lord who is *“the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”* (11:25-26). It is the abundance of blessings that God showers upon us every day *“out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all”* (Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*) while also promising us that *“on the last day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.”* It is our Good Shepherd who will take us by the hand and lead us through even the darkest valleys of life, so that we might live in confidence that *“surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”* (Psalm 23:6).

- “Because we have a Good Shepherd, as our Gospel reading in John 10 reminds us, we are not forgotten. God will provide, even during seasons of uncertainty. As sheep, we cannot see the entire landscape, and we cannot easily shift our course during changing conditions. But the shepherd knows the ultimate destination, always keeping in mind where the sheep need to be by the day’s end. The shepherd watches over the flock while leading them through all seasons of life, including seasons of grief. We are continually being shown that we are needed and are a part of something greater than ourselves.” – Kiki Barnes.

Taking someone by the hand is an act of great intimacy and trust; we would not allow a stranger to perform such an action. Leading someone by the hand also implies a close, caring loving relationship with that person; it is not something that can be done from a distance. The Good Shepherd is one who is with us, who loves us, who cares so much for us that he abides with us always; nothing can separate us from the love

of our loving shepherd. We live in confidence that this Good Shepherd will lead us and guide us all the days of our lives; our Good Shepherd will *“take my hand and lead me along life’s way; direct, protect and feed me from day to day.”* (ELW Hymn 767). The one who takes us by the hand and leads us through all of life’s changes and challenges promises us that *“when the tempest rages, I need not fear; for you, the Rock of Ages, are always near ... for when your hand is guiding, I fear no foe.”* The Shepherd who guides us all the days of our lives will also lead us to our eternal home when our days in this life come to an end, for it is the grace of God that is ours in Jesus Christ that has *“brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”* (ELW Hymn 779). It is this gracious leading that is shown to us in Revelation, where our Good Shepherd leads his flock to that place where *“they will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”* (Revelation 9:16-17). Our Good Shepherd is our precious Lord who will *“hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand lest I fall. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.”* (ELW Hymn 773).

- “Trust God with undoubting confidence. Take God’s hand with humble gratitude. Obey his voice. In sickness and in health, by night and by day, at home and in crowds, God will watch over you with inexpressible tenderness.”
– Timothy Dwight.

The boardwalk at Seaside Heights was no longer frightening to me because in my parents’ hands I knew I was safe. I no longer have my parents’ hands to hold as I face the sorrows and challenges that we all face in the course of our lives, but all of us have the assurance that when we call upon our Lord to *“take my hand and lead me along life’s way”* that we need never fear, because our Good and Loving Shepherd will be with us always, will take us by the hand and lead us through life’s darkest valleys, and will one day lead us to our eternal home where *“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”* (Revelation 21:4). Safe in the loving hands of Jesus, we need never fear; for our Lord will lead us and guide us always, so that we may enjoy the abundant life that God desires for us now, even as one day our Lord will lead us to our eternal home, where we will dwell in the house of our loving Shepherd forever – safe in the hands of the Lord.
Amen.