

Fourth Sunday of Easter – May 12, 2019

John 10:22-30

22 Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. 24 The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. 27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

Let's begin with an exciting discussion starter—insurance. Now for some insurance may be an exciting topic, if you're in the insurance business it is a big part of your life. But for most people while insurance is a very necessary part of our lives, is not exactly our favorite topic to discuss. There are the basic insurances almost everyone needs—health insurance, home or renter's insurance, auto or vehicle insurance and even life insurance. We need these things to varying degrees to protect ourselves against unforeseen costs, often when bad things happen. Then there are the insurances that are not so common, if not a big strange, that are available for purchase. There is body part insurance, whether voices or arms or legs for those especially in the entertainment or sports professions who want to protect against injury. There is something called fantasy sports insurance for when a player on your team gets injured which helps to cover your fees and investments. There is even alien abduction insurance for those who might have those kinds of worries which promises to pay out for any expenses that occur. But today I want to talk about sheep insurance. Not insurance that is taken out for the loss of a pet or the loss of livestock, but actual insurance for sheep. As we see in our text, we are all sheep. And so playing the part of an insurance salesman, we will look at the best insurance available for sheep, The Good Shepherd Plan. After considering who is eligible we will look at the benefits of both the plan's short term coverage as well as its long term coverage.

When it comes to this insurance plan, only sheep can apply. Everyone in this world is a sheep, and while being called a sheep may seem insulting to many—who wouldn't want to be lion instead of a lamb—it is an accurate description. Sheep are not the most intelligent of creatures, they need help in finding food, they get lost easily, and they need protection from predators. In short, there is only one pre-existing condition that is required—being a sinner. Our sinful nature leads us away from God and fights against him every step of the way and so all people qualify as sheep.

While all sheep are eligible, not every sheep is a part of this Good Shepherd Plan. We see that illustrated in these verses and their greater context. John 10 is the Good Shepherd chapter. Three sections of it are covered over three years as the gospel lesson for this Sunday. The first two sections happened on a separate occasion, two months before our text. The Jewish leaders had come to confront Jesus after he had healed a man born blind (ch. 9). He answered with his well-known statements: "I am the good shepherd" (10:11,14) and "I am the gate for the sheep" (10:7). While their reaction was divided, "many of them said, 'He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?'" (10:20).

Now two months later it was the time for the Feast of Dedication, the festival that remembered the rededication of the temple by the Maccabees, known today more often as

Hanukkah. Jesus was back in Jerusalem and the Jews confronted him in Solomon's Colonnade, a more sheltered area of the temple for the stormy winter months. "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly" (v. 24). This was more than just an earnest plea for help and clarification. 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" (vv. 25-26). These sheep were not a part of the plan; they were not Jesus' sheep, because they did not believe. Eligibility is not a matter of ability or quality, it is simply a matter of faith.

When it comes to insurance, different plans will cover different things. Car insurance covers accidents or damage, the same for insurance on your home. Health insurance covers medical emergencies as well as routine care. With the Good Shepherd Plan, there is short term coverage for the life in this world, all the things that happen to us because of sin. There is also long term coverage for the life beyond this world and what happens to us after our death.

So first for short term coverage, what benefits come with this plan? Verse 27: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." First, we note that Jesus describes these sheep as "my sheep." These sheep belong to him. He cares about them and wants what is best for them. He will provide the food, shelter, protection and guidance that they need. Closely related to this is that Jesus "knows" his sheep. He is not some far off owner of the sheep who has a flock that belongs to him on paper, but as the shepherd he has an intimate knowledge of each and every one of his sheep. He knows their strengths and weaknesses, he knows their problems and troubles, he knows their sins and temptations, and he knows their joy and sadness. Being a part of this Good Shepherd plan, there is nothing better than to know that while living in this world we belong to someone who loves us, who knows everything about us and will still forgive our sins and take care of us.

The benefits of this coverage bring results in the lives of his sheep. The sheep listen to his voice and follow him (v. 27). The sheep are not left to fend for themselves, they know the voice of their shepherd and know to listen to him. There is no one better to follow because he will guide them to food and shelter, he will lead them out of danger and trouble to safer spaces. So where do we hear his voice? We hear it in his Word. We hear it through the proclamation of pastors, teachers, parents and those who share it. Everything he has laid out in the Bible is for our good and benefit. We will follow him wherever he leads us because we trust that he is watching out for us and will guide us through all the ups and downs of this life as we make our way to our home in heaven.

This brings us to the long term coverage and its benefits. Verse 28: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." The clear benefit here is eternal life in heaven. The wonderful part is that it is a gift that is given. There is nothing the sheep need to do; if that were the case it would be impossible, because sheep are just sheep, sinners with no hope of saving themselves. "They shall never perish" speaks not to an earthly or temporal death in this life, but to being saved from an eternal death in hell. In this season of Easter we have the sure hope that our death is only a transition to our eternal life to come and even our frail human bodies will be resurrected on the Last Day to join us in heaven.

One other benefit here is snatch protection—"no one can snatch them out of my hand" (v. 28). This gift of eternal life comes with the promise that we cannot lose this coverage. Nothing can take it away. This brings to mind the long list of things in Romans 8(:38-39) "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Yet when we see this snatch protection, how do we explain it when we know of Christians who have fallen away? Were they not covered in the first place? Was there a fault in the coverage? When it comes to such problems, the fault never lies with God, his protection is perfect. The fault lies with the sheep. God will not force someone into this plan, as with the Jews in our text, they were not Jesus' sheep because of unbelief. Those who fall away do so because they choose to reject the coverage, whether with an immediate hasty decision or a gradual weakening over time. For our own protection, we keep in mind that all sheep need food and so we will continue to feed our faith with Word and Sacrament so that the Holy Spirit can keep us strong. We will also encourage the same protection for others. If we know of fellow sheep who have wandered away or have never even been enrolled we can continue to remind them of benefits of the Good Shepherd Plan. It is never too late for God to add them to this flock.

When it comes to different types of insurance often we will purchase the coverage and then forget about it until it is needed for a crisis or accident in our life. The Good Shepherd Plan is different because it is always needed. With our day to day lives and the sin that we struggle with we need those short term benefits of knowing that as sheep we belong to Jesus and he knows everything about us. He will continue to forgive our sins and watch over us each and every day. The long term coverage is what matters most and so we look forward to the day when we will join our fellow sheep in the flock of all believers in heaven. No one can take that away from us. Amen.