

Scripture: John 3:35; John 10:28-29
Message: These Hands Hold
March 31, 2019; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
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This morning we are going to talk about sheep: four-legged, woolly creatures that eat grass. And follow shepherds. And get lost. And are found again.

Sheep are usually part of a flock. A shepherd seldom has only one sheep; they typically have many.

Shepherds are very particular about their sheep and the sheep know it. There is this unique relationship between shepherds and sheep. Sheep trust their shepherd to take care of every detail for the contentment of the sheep: their food, health, safety, shelter. Sheep know their shepherd by the sound of his voice.

For many of us, this understanding of a shepherd and sheep is outside of our realm of experience. We don't own sheep. For people who have never lived on a farm, it might be hard to understand that this kind of relationship is possible with an animal. A dog or a cat, maybe. But a whole bunch of sheep?

For those who were listening to Jesus while he lived on this earth, the illustration made complete sense. They would have been familiar with the idea of a shepherd caring for sheep. Sheep were so much part of their life and society, even if they did not own sheep themselves. They knew how sheep provided so many things for a family. They were part of the system of sacrifices in the temple. They frequently saw shepherds and sheep in the surrounding countryside.

That's what makes this such a beautiful illustration for the theme of hands that hold. The gentle, yet firm hands of the shepherd held sheep in their care.

As Jesus talks about sheep, we see that the sheep do three things: they *listen* to Jesus, the Shepherd's voice, they *experience* him as he gets to know them, and so they start to *walk* with him. The response of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is to give his sheep the gift of life and the gift of safety or salvation.

Who would not want to be held by a Shepherd like this?

In John 10 Jesus talks about the flock of which he is the Shepherd. His sheep know him; they know Jesus' voice and follow him. When we think about a flock of sheep, we do not think only of ewes and rams, but also of young lambs. A flock includes young sheep as well

as old, newborn as well as elderly sheep. All are part of the flock; all follow the shepherd.

Jesus has it all figured out who his sheep are. "I know them," he says. We can be sure that we are part of his flock, in his hands, even before we are born. In Ephesians 1:4 we read, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world." He does not choose us after we become 8 years old or 13 or 26 or 57 or 78. He does not wait to first see how we start out our lives, what sort of person we will be, whether we're worth choosing or not. We are chosen, held in his hands, already before we are born.

It's easy to get stuck on this, on who is or is not chosen: Am I? Why not others? But instead of getting stuck here and trying to know how God does this or why he says this, let us see his gracious love. He comes to us. He wants a relationship with us. Left to ourselves, we would not make that choice, because of our sin. But God comes to have a relationship with us, to hold us in his hands. Are we going to keep asking "why?" Or will we thankfully trust him?

God speaks his love to us through Jesus, promising to hold us in his hands. But we're not alone in this relationship with God, as if it's just me and Jesus. Remember that sheep are part of a flock; we are part of a church family, a church community. *Together* we listen to the voice of the Shepherd. *Together* we experience our relationship with him. *Together* we walk with him and follow the Shepherd. *Together* we remind each other and encourage each other to trust the hands that hold us.

Listen to the voice of the Shepherd. Jesus says (John 10:28), "I give them eternal life." It is a gift from our Lord. A gift is never earned. It is always freely given. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no-one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The hands that hold us reach out to offer this gift. It is something which we can do nothing about. We do not have to perform according to certain standards. We do not have to earn a certain number of brownie points before he will hold us. That would be impossible, especially considering that we are chosen already as infants and before. "'Tis not that I did choose you, for Lord that could not be. This heart would still refuse you, had you not chosen me."

All that we can do is accept that which Jesus Christ graciously gives us. We trust his hands to hold us, without question. We respond in humble thanksgiving that the Lord has

called us, accepted us, claimed us to be part of his community.

Then the Good Shepherd tells us that we will never lose this place of belonging to his flock.

Continuing in John 10:28, Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish." Belonging to Jesus, having his hands hold us, is for eternity. He does not drop us or let go of us at our death. He doesn't let go when we get weak and can't do much, or when our minds are not clear. These hands hold. Jesus says that those whom he holds in his hands will never perish. That is not a reference to earthly death. Death is the common end of everyone on this earth. But that physical death is not the final end. There is resurrection. There is life after death. There is eternal life already now. We are in the hands of Jesus in this life, and through our death to eternity.

And the Good Shepherd continues to say, in John 10:28, "No one can snatch them out of my hands." We are secure in the hands of Jesus. Satan is out to steal the sheep away from Jesus and bring them over to himself. But the Good Shepherd will not let that happen.

Let's go back to the idea of a flock of sheep. A shepherd watches over his flock of sheep. He watches closely for wild animals which sneak behind rocks and trees and suddenly jump out at the flock to snatch away one of the sheep. The shepherd guides the flock away from areas of potential danger. He faces those wolves or bears which try to steal and kill his sheep.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd. We are his sheep. He will not allow anyone to snatch us away. We are precious to him and he holds us safely in his hands.

But that does not give us any rights to go and wander and do whatever we please. We may not carelessly put ourselves in dangerous positions, thinking that Jesus will protect us anyway. This promise does not relieve us of all responsibility and put it all on Jesus' shoulders.

As part of the flock, we must follow the Shepherd. We listen to his voice. This is true for each of the sheep of this flock, young and old and everyone in between. We respond in thankfulness for his strong hands that hold us. We trust him and live in faithful obedience to our Lord and Master and Shepherd.

The promise of Jesus is that when we do find ourselves in trouble, he will be there to help us. Sometimes we may have to suffer in order to learn our lesson. But Jesus will not let

us be snatched from his hands that hold us.

It is one of the precious things about the Christian faith that our continuing in this eternal life does not depend on our feeble hold on Christ, but on his firm grip on us. It's not that those who follow Jesus will be saved from all earthly troubles, but that we will be held in his hands, no matter what earthly troubles may occur.

With that promise we will *want* to live in obedience. Remember, this is the promise of the Shepherd before we even had a chance to prove ourselves or to ask for his help. Yes, we will want to listen to his voice and follow him!

What a great comfort that we can never lose our place in his hands. We have nothing to fear, not even the devil himself. We do not have to worry that we are good enough or doing enough good. We do not have to worry that our sins will cancel our place in the flock. We have been chosen for eternal life. Eternal life is given to us by Christ and we shall never perish. No one can snatch us from our Lord and Saviour. That is God's promise in his Word.

Now, there's a bit more to this idea of being held by the hands of Jesus. For one, we are also told that the Father has placed *everything* in his hands. Remember the words of Jesus as he ascended: "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me."

These are not some ordinary hands that hold us. These are hands of power and authority and strength. These are hands that hold the whole world and all creation. We can certainly trust these hands to hold us.

Also, Jesus speaks of how no one can snatch us out of the Father's hand. Through Jesus, we can know that we are held by the almighty hands of God, our Father in heaven. A word that we use in this context is providence.

The Heidelberg Catechism defines providence as "the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that all things come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand."

These are the hands that hold you. Trust these hands. They will never let you go. Remind your fellow sheep of these loving, powerful hands. Thank the Father for these loving hands that hold us, for the Good Shepherd who holds us. Live your thanksgiving with joy and confidence.

Amen.

Heidelberg Catechism: Q & A 26

Q. What do you believe when you say, "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth"?

A. *That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who out of nothing created heaven and earth and everything in them,
who still upholds and rules them by his eternal counsel and providence,
is my God and Father because of Christ his Son.
I trust him so much that I do not doubt
he will provide whatever I need for body and soul,
and he will turn to my good
whatever adversity he sends me in this sad world.
He is able to do this because he is almighty God;
he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.*

Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. *Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God
by which he upholds, as with his hand,
heaven and earth and all creatures,
and so rules them that all things come to us
not by chance but from his fatherly hand.*

Q. How does the knowledge of God's creation and providence help us?

A. *We can be patient when things go against us,
thankful when things go well,
and for the future we can have
good confidence in our faithful God and Father
that nothing will separate us from his love.
All creatures are so completely in his hand
that without his will they can neither move nor be moved.*