

Held Forever

King of Glory Lutheran
Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry
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Year C: John 10:22-30

²² At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico 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 Messiah, tell us plainly.” ²⁵ Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; ²⁶ but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰ The Father and I are one.”

“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. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand.” No matter what happens in these crazy lives of ours, God pursues us, chooses us, loves us, holds us forever and ever and ever. Amen!

I once heard a mother say, “When I had my child, I felt like I was watching my own heart walk around in another body.” What a statement! The connection between parent and child is not only held together by DNA, but also emotionally. Whether your nickname was or is...meemah, mommaroony, mommers, mom-er-ific, or simply, mom, your heart is forever glued together with your child.

Mothers can never stop being mothers. It’s why they said, ‘stay safe and make good choices.’ Then they got scared and mad when we stayed out too late, or made stupid choices, or disobeyed their rules. (But then again, none of you ever did any of those things, right?!) We might not have understood when we were 16, but when the tables were turned, it made perfect sense.

Rapunzel’s dad calls up to her in the tower. ‘Rapunzel, you’ve let me down, you’ve let your mother down, and now you’ve let your hair down.’ (Cartoon by T. Russell Harris)

It’s no wonder there are nicknames like ‘mama bear,’ ‘mother-hen,’ and ‘eagle eyes’. Truth be told, it was our job to make them mad so they could lean into that protector side of being a parent. Both moms and dads want to keep their children and grandchildren safe. They get angry or sad when that doesn’t happen.

Yet, its not just about safety. Parents continue to provide. Whenever I leave my Mom's home, she inevitably says, "Do you need caffeine? Chips to keep you awake as you drive? Take anything from the refrigerator you want." Moms provide. They pray. They worry. But it all comes from a place of love.

Listen again to a few verses of Psalm 23. *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters.*

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me, your rod and your staff will comfort me.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

This depiction of a loving shepherd implies that the sheep will always have what they need. They will have abundant food. They won't have to be scared for they will be safe. This shepherd promises to provide.

At the heart of our text for today, is an enormous promise. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand." Will you say that sentence? 'No one will snatch them out of my hand.'

When we were little, hopefully our mother's arms were a place of safety. We felt safe and secure. Snuggling in, all was right with the world. This is Jesus' promise. Nothing can separate us from God. Ever. Or ever or ever or ever.

God promises to hold us and will not abandon us ever. In our times of trial, God will not leave or forsake us. That's what this promise proclaims. 'I know my sheep. They will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.'

We might run from God. Or hide from God. Or fight with God. There may be seasons when we don't want to have anything to do with Jesus. That doesn't negate Jesus' promise. There is a church sign that reads, 'God didn't move. You did.' God doesn't move. The Good Shepherd is right there; standing by. Choosing us, loving us unconditionally, with an undying and ceaseless love.

Now Jesus' promise may sound like a paradox. His words imply safety in God's arms, yet our lived experience says otherwise. We know there are women who live in fear of their partners. There are firefighters and police who never know what will happen when they arrive on scene. Graduates wonder if there will be jobs. Employees are being let go and wonder where they will find the next job, let alone insurance. People of color are literally being snatched away from home and loved ones based on what they look like. Parents wail in ICU rooms due to horrendous car accidents. Widowers try to live through the 'first' Birthdays and anniversaries after the death of a beloved spouse. Life seems to plot to make us feel unsafe.ⁱ

Yet, hear this clearly! Because we walk in faith...because we have a trustworthy shepherd, because Jesus said it...we believe it! We believe that promise on our good days and we believe it through our tears and deep-seated frustrations. 'My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.'

That line in Psalm 23: Surely goodness and mercy will follow me... That word follow? In Hebrew, it actually means to 'pursue.' Like a mother running after a toddler who is headed towards danger. Like the Egyptians pursuing the Israelites into the Red Sea. God is constantly running after us!

Martin Luther talked about something called God's election. What that meant was 'a present-tense reality: God's immediate and ongoing decision to choose us, to love us, to save us. And whenever preachers proclaim God's promises, Luther believed, God once again arrives on the scene to elect people to abundant life' with Jesus the Good Shepherd.ⁱⁱ

You see, unlike our parents who might have – just once in awhile – loved us conditionally. God will never stop pursuing us. Choosing us! Loving us! Holding us. Walking with us. Never, ever, ever. For Jesus decided and decides again each day that we are worth loving, no matter what.

This day and each day, I pray we will know that truth deep in our souls; from the tops of our heads to the bottoms of our feet. The Good Shepherd, God Himself loves us and claims us forever. No one and nothing can snatch us away from Jesus. Amen!

ⁱ <https://www.davidlose.net/2016/04/easter-4-c-the-electing-word/>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.