

## Life Laid Down

John 10:11-18

In the first Captain America film, Steve Rogers is a small, scrawny guy who's been rejected from the army many times. He gets picked for the super soldier program because of his determination. At one point in the training, the colonel in charge grabs a dummy grenade and tosses it towards the group of hopeful soldiers. Everyone else runs away, but Steve Rogers runs toward the grenade, covering it with his body. Even though he'd undergone hazing from his fellow soldiers, he still was willing to lay down his life to save them. That was what made him worthy of becoming Captain America.

Of course there are real life examples of people laying down their lives to save others. Just a few short months ago, football coach Aaron Feis threw himself in front of students as bullets hailed down at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. People in Texas spent the weekend celebrating the Battle of San Jacinto, the victory that followed the defeat of the Texans at the Battle of the Alamo and all those who lost their lives there. Nathan Hale, before he was hung as an American spy during the Revolutionary War, said "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." The list of examples goes on and on.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus says he is the Good Shepherd, and he lays down his life for the sheep. He says this not once, not twice, but five times in these few verses. Five times! At first it sounds ridiculous: what fool of a shepherd would die for his sheep? How can he fulfill his duties after he's dead? How could he care for his sheep? How can he guide the sheep? How can he guard the sheep? A shepherd giving his life for his sheep only works if it eliminates the threats.

But when Jesus laid down his life for us on the cross, he did defeat all of the threats to our lives. As we read from Luther's explanation of the second article of the Apostles' Creed, Jesus "won [us] from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death." Jesus laid down his life not as a victim, but in victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. His death defeated the wolves that threatened his sheep.

As foolish as it seems to think of a shepherd laying his life down for the sheep, it's even more foolish to think of someone laying down their life for their enemies. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." When we were sinners, when we were the enemies of God, Jesus loved us so much that he laid his life down for us, died for us on the cross. He loved us so much that he died for us, of his own free choice as the ultimate act of love. Even though we're often unlovable, even though we often reject his love, God loves us anyway. God loves us so much that God chose to love us, to send Jesus to die for us.

This love of Jesus that would drive him to lay down his life for you and me is not some passive thing done to him. Jesus is not the victim here; he is the victor, actively striving and seeking your salvation by laying down his life for you, giving up his life in battle with your enemies...for you! "I lay down my life that I may take it up again," Jesus said. "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again" (John 10:17-18). Jesus didn't lay down his life on a whim or without knowing what he was doing. Jesus laid down his life on the cross because he knew it was the only way to save you from sin, death, and the devil. Jesus descended into the valley of the shadow of death, because he knew that only by going there himself could he lead you out of death and into life. Jesus had the authority to lay down his life, and he had the authority to take it up again. And because of that, Jesus has the authority to give you forgiveness and eternal life.

One of the earliest pieces of Christian art is of a shepherd, painted in the catacombs below Rome, where the earliest Christians buried their dead when things were very dark indeed for Christians. The military power of Rome had turned against Christians. They were killed in persecution, slaughtered in sport.

Somehow, however, as some things in Rome became darker for the Christians, other things became clearer. On the walls of these tombs, the early Christians painted their Savior, confessing the wonderful power of God. A power that saw and claimed the persecuted, the

killed, the powerless, and the rejected. One figure, with a lamb across his shoulders, is the great Shepherd of the sheep. This is how the early Roman Christians retold the story of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who had laid down his life for them and defeated death for them.

The Roman Christians needed to be reminded Jesus sees their suffering and he comes to find them, to bind up their wounds, and gather them together and give them the promise of life everlasting. Taking them upon his shoulders, he will raise them up and bring them to a new creation and joy that never ends. In the catacombs below Rome, in the mazes of death, the early Christians confessed Jesus to be the way, the truth, and the life. He is the one who has come to save God's people and he calls all people to follow him.

As the end of the semester approaches, as life continues to be full of change, as pain still comes into our lives, remember that you are all sheep of the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for you, to forgive you for all the things that will go wrong, to sustain you and lead you in the ways that you should go. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus is with you. Like that early Christian fresco of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Through him, you live. In him, you die. And, by him, you will be raised to eternal life.

This is the Good News of the Good Shepherd: Christ laid down his life for us when we couldn't, and wouldn't lay down our lives. When you fear that you have wandered far from the fold, Jesus finds you and brings you back. And when you know that you have nothing, absolutely nothing, to offer God, he offers you himself. This has nothing to do with what kind of sheep we've been. It has everything to do with the love and mercy of the Good Shepherd. He's the Good Shepherd, and he lays down his life for the sheep. The Good Shepherd is with you and before you and in you—and for you. That's a promise we can trust.

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IA  
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