

Safe in God's Hands

John 10:22-30

"He's got the whole world in His hands." This anonymously written African American spiritual hymn has existed for many years in several versions. Since its first known publication in 1927, it has been covered by countless artists. With each successive stanza, we could very well keep going and list everything that He has in His hands. Of course, the "He" in "He's got the whole world in His hands" is God Himself. For this hymn is a hymn of trust in God's hand, even when the circumstances of this fallen world are set against God's people.

Indeed, everything in all of creation is in God's hands. Our very lives are in His hands, including our past, our present, and our future. From the beginning of creation to the end is in His hands. "He's got the whole world in His hands."

But oh, how we try to wrest control from God's hands and put it into our own. We can sometimes get the illusion that things are in our control. An article from 2018 called "Illusion of Control: Why the World Is Full of Buttons That Don't Work" makes this point well. It illustrates our desire to have everything in our own control. In some cities, there is an incredible number of crosswalk buttons that actually do not work, and there may be no real incentive to fix them. The article goes on to state that there are buttons around us that are essentially placebo buttons that give us the illusion of control. You know how that little "close elevator door" button usually does not seem to actually do anything immediately. The door seems to close on its own timing no matter what. But pressing it makes you feel like you are in control over this contraption made to take you up and down. So often we surround

ourselves with things that give us the illusion that we are in control. But it often feels more like our hands are tied at the end of each day. Now add on top of this the things that we know that we have no control over, such as sickness, weather, wars, the economy, the happenings across the world, and it may make us want to throw our hands up in the air in despair. Maybe, just maybe, you start to wonder, "Does He have the whole world in His hands?" Because there are many times when our attempts at explanations just don't work.

Those questioning Jesus thought they were in control. The religious leaders in Jerusalem thought they could control the people, control the Romans, control even God. They thought everything was in their hands. And so, they want to know who Jesus is. They want to put a label on him. Once they did so, they would know how to deal with him, how to control him, how to keep him in their hands.

Yet Jesus knew things were not in their hands. He was not in their hands. Not yet, at least. He knew they were all in God's hands. He knew He was in God's hands. He would be given into their hands at the right time. He would be given into the hands of sinful men. But he would do so in order that no one and nothing would be able to take his sheep out of his father's hands.

Jesus is not afraid of their anger. He is not scared of their rejection. In fact, He is willing to bear their rejection because they cannot stop what He is doing. What Jesus is doing is not blasphemy. It is mercy. They think Jesus, being man, has made Himself God. In fact, it is the opposite. Jesus, being God, has taken on human flesh and become man. Not only has He taken on human flesh, but He has become human in

order that He might suffer and die for the sins of the world.

Like a shepherd, He will lay down His life for His sheep. He will suffer and die under the punishment for sin and then rise from the dead and proclaim the triumph of His love. Though they kill Him, Jesus knows that His Father will raise Him from the dead and deliver His sheep into His hands. Nothing can separate sinners from God's love. With this proclamation of love, Jesus will gather His sheep. And, having gathered them, He will guard them as He leads them through this world.

One of the most popular, most well-loved images of Jesus is of him as our Good Shepherd. It's been that way almost since the very beginning. 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. These early Christians, suffering persecution, began painting figures on the walls of their graves. Clear visions of God's mercy and power. In the darkness of the catacombs, they painted to show the light of salvation. In the tombs, where the early Christians buried their martyrs, who had been killed and cast off by the powers of the world. 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. This is how they told of how, despite death and darkness, the Good Shepherd kept them safe, and none of his flock would be snatched out of his hand.

Jesus' hand is still at work through His church today, baptizing and teaching. Jesus' hand is at work when young and old alike have the promises of Baptism poured out upon their heads. Jesus' hands are at work when His body and blood are delivered into our mouths to eat. Jesus' hands are at work when He opens the Scriptures to us to teach us the words of God. Our whole lives are in His hands.

This is also Mother's Day weekend. The life of a mother is a tension between holding the child close for protection, and of pushing their child out into the world, to spread their wings and fly. As author Dorothy Canfield puts it, "A mother is not a person to lean on, but a person to make leaning unnecessary." Mothers protect their children, teach their children, but their goal is for their children to grow up and move out on their own.

On their own, but never alone. Even as children grow, graduate, and move away, mothering never really is done. Mothers are always there with a comforting word and wise advice. As humorist Erma Bombeck wrote, "When your mother asks, 'Do you want a piece of advice?' it is a mere formality. It doesn't matter if you answer yes or no. You're going to get it anyway." But we also trust that as children grow up and move away, that they are still in God's hands.

God has established his kingdom in Jesus Christ. Through the gospel, God has called you into that kingdom and, though this world and

Satan himself should fight against it, that kingdom will never be taken away. As the end of the semester comes for ISU students and approaches for younger students, 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 promises 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, this 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: You are in the hands of the Good Shepherd, and nothing can snatch you out of his hand. 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. The Good Shepherd is with you and before you and in you—and for you. The Good Shepherd keeps His flock safe. He's got the whole world in His hands, even and especially you. That's a promise you can trust.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
Ames, IA
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