

At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

A statistical survey once noted that 20% of all fatal accidents occur in automobiles; that 17% of all accidents occur in the home; travelling by air, rail or water accounts for another 16%. Even walking the streets isn't safe, since 14% of all accidents happen to pedestrians. However, only .001% of all deaths occur in church worship services, (none related to my sermons, as far as I know) and most of the deaths in church were related to previous physical disorders. Therefore, the safest place for you to be at any time is in church. You might also want to be in Bible study, because the percentage there is even less. Go to church! It might just save your life!

That may be a bit tongue-in-cheek, especially since the church isn't always a safe place. In times of persecution, the church is not always a haven, but a target for the hatred of evil men. But there is one place that is always safe—and that is to be safe in the arms of the Good Shepherd, as we trust in Him to watch over us in all things.

One of my favourite images has always been of Jesus holding in His arms a little lamb, or having it draped like a scarf across his neck. He loves and cares for His lambs, and He says: *they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.* And how we need to know that we are safe in the arms of the Good Shepherd! The events of this past week have reminded us, once again, in frightening, dramatic fashion just how troubled a place this world is. As cheering fans gathered at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, two explosions brought chaos, death and destruction where people thought only of triumph and joy. So many are still in disbelief: how can something like this happen? Why would anyone be so cruel and callous?

Earlier this month, the RCMP said they were investigating after threats of a high school shooting in Red Deer were posted on Facebook. Of all the places we would like to believe that our children were safe, we thought it would be at school. But that illusion is disappearing.

Then again, where is anyone truly safe? Thanks be to God that there aren't more accidents on our roads, but we all know that the highways and city streets can be dangerous places. That is why we learn to drive defensively. We hear of home invasions and fires, and even though we do everything we can to protect ourselves, sometimes things still happen to rob us of our security. Downtown Calgary is very different from Afghanistan, but we have our problems, too. Gone are the days when you could leave your house unlocked, or you wouldn't worry about your children being out on the street after dark.

This sinful world will never, ever be as secure as we would like it to be. We could build every home to be like the reinforced bunker of NORAD, more than 2,400 feet underground in Cheyenne Mountain. But even that does not guarantee our safety. It cannot keep us from the inevitable consequences of our sinfulness. It cannot keep us from the eternal condemnation that our sin deserves

Even when it seems there is no safety, we can be sure that we are safe in the Good Shepherd's arms. Christian songwriter Twila Paris said: *"We human being are so security-oriented. Whether it is conscious or not, we all need and want security in our lives. From the time we are born, we are clinging to something. That's okay, but we've got to be clinging to the right thing. When we are holding onto Jesus, that's when we are holding on to real hope."* (Marriage Partnership, Vol. 13, no. 3). But more than just our clinging to Jesus, we have His promise that He holds us in His loving arms! That makes all the difference in this troubled world. The psalmist said: *Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.* (Psalm 146:3 - ESV) Yet that is exactly what many people do—they put their trust, their security, their eternal salvation in the hands of mere men. People look

to doctors to fix all our health issues. We look to scientists to solve our global warming problems. We look to armies and police to deliver us from the enemies and evil around us. God has given these people, and many others in various vocations, to bring good to the earth. But they cannot save us. They cannot always keep us safe. They cannot deliver us from the power that sin has over us, and the punishment that our sins have earned. So many people are clinging to the wrong things.

Even when Jesus lived among them, there were many people who were clinging to the wrong things. Our text notes: ***So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock.*** When these people wanted a clear answer as to whether or not Jesus was the Messiah, it wasn’t because they were anxious to believe. If Jesus had simply said, “I am the Christ”, they probably would have started to stone Him. They thought they were so smug, so safe, so secure in their own religious rightness that they didn’t need a shepherd—and they certainly didn’t need Jesus as their shepherd. The very fact that they ignored the clear testimony of the miracles and the teaching of the Saviour showed that they didn’t want Jesus to be their shepherd.

Are there not times when we act the exact same way? We think we have it all together, that we can do without God, that we don’t need Him to be such a big part of our lives. We want to go it alone. Oh, it is good to know that God is there when we really, really need Him. But for the most part, we think we are fine just the way we are.

Yet, how we fool ourselves! When Jesus speaks of us as sheep that this is not the most flattering comparison. Sheep aren’t all that bright. They have a tendency to wander, unaware of the dangers. Rescue them from danger, and they may run into the same danger again. We do the exact same thing. We have been distracted and misguided by the devil, by the world around us, and by the desires of our sinful flesh, so that we don’t hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling us to the safety of His care. So often we hear only what we want to hear.

Two men were walking along a crowded city sidewalk. Suddenly, one of the men remarked, “Listen to the lovely sound of that cricket,” But the other man could not hear the sound. He asked his friend how he could hear the sound of a cricket amid the roar of the traffic and the sound of the people. The first man, who was a zoologist, had trained himself to hear the sounds of nature. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a looney (a Canadian dollar coin), dropped it onto the sidewalk, and watch intently as a dozen people began to look for the coin as they heard it clanking around amid the sounds of the traffic and the sounds of the crowded city living. He turned to his friend and said, “We hear what we listen for.”

We need to learn to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Only His voice can lead us to safety. In our first lesson today, Paul spoke to the elders in the church at Ephesus about his final journey to Jerusalem. Paul expected that the days ahead would result in his martyrdom. Even in the face of this, Paul felt safe and secure in the arms of Jesus. He also warned the elders of the church: ***Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*** (Acts 20:28-30 - ESV) Paul was concerned that people would forget the Shepherd’s voice, and that the devil, working through the worldly wolves he uses as his servants, would destroy the flock. I am sure that is was some of these thoughts that lead the hymn writer to say: *I walk in danger all the way. The thought shall never leave me That Satan, who has marked his prey, Is plotting to deceive me. This foe with hidden snares May seize me unawares If I should fail to watch and pray. I walk in danger all the way.* (LSB 716, st. 1)

But there is safety for the sheep who hear and focus on the shepherd’s voice. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the one who would do—and who did do—anything for His flock. ***I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.*** (John 10:14-15 - ESV) That hymn writer who said that we walk in danger all the way also said: *I walk with Jesus all the way, His guidance never fails me; Within His wounds I find a stay When Satan's power assails me; And by His footsteps led, My path I safely tread. No evil leads my soul astray I walk with Jesus all the way.* (LSB 716, st. 5)

Jesus said: ***My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.*** Sadly, this world of sin has more than its share of dangers, worries and cares. But we overcome them all when we are safe in the Saviour’s arms—those arms marked by the nails that held Him to the cross. We know that the Good Shepherd suffered our punishment to deliver us from sin and death. We are in the strong arms of the

Living Lord, who rose again from the dead. Our Saviour lives to lead His flock, to protect His flock, to feed His flock. John told us: ***They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.***” (Revelation 7:16-17 - ESV)

If we are going into surgery, we are safe in the arms of the Good Shepherd, so that no matter what that operation may bring, He will bless us and lead us to the glory of heaven. If we are set upon by people in this world, we still know the Shepherd will bring us safely to our heavenly home. Persecuted, hated, tempted—no matter what the devil will try to do to destroy our faith and hope, we are secure. As Paul told Timothy: ***I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.*** (2 Timothy 1:12 - NASB) Trusting in Him, we are safe in His arms, both now and eternally. Amen.