

No One Can Snatch Us Away

Psalm 23; John 10:22-30

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Introduction: In our reading, you will hear about the festival of the Dedication, which is Hanukkah, when the Temple of Jerusalem was rededicated following its defilement by the Seleucid king Antiochus IV, who had consecrated a statue of Zeus in the Temple. The festival was associated with Jewish nationalist aspirations, and so was an opportune time to press Jesus to find out if He were the Messiah.

Jesus frames His response using the imagery of sheep because the usual scriptural readings in the synagogues at this time of year were related to shepherds.

John 10:22-30

²²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the [Jewish leaders] gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

²⁵Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one."

Prayer: Lord God, we hear Your voice, we know You, not help us to follow You. Place Your blessing upon this message that in it each would hear not my voice, but Your voice giving us eternal life and security. Amen.

Fifteen years ago, on Monday, April 30, 2001, as Johnny came down the stairs, he announced, "I don't want to go to school." I said something like, "Well, you have to go put on your shoes." When he came down the stairs on Tuesday and said, "I don't want to go to school," I questioned him. I asked him if there were something wrong or some problems at school. Rather nonchalantly he explained, "I don't want to go to school because I know everything already." Just one month shy of the end of kindergarten, Johnny thought he knew everything he needed to learn at school.

The bravado of confidence can often be a thin veneer over self-doubt. That is why this passage is for people like us. The church leaders of Jesus' day want to know if Jesus is the Messiah. He explains to them that all he does testifies to who He is, but they don't believe. They don't recognize His voice.

As we gather here, I suspect that some or all of us wonder if we hear and know the voice of our Savior. At one time or another or maybe all the time, we wonder whether we really believe. We may feel like we don't hear the Lord's voice. We may feel like we aren't a part of the Lord's flock, especially since most of us have never had a dramatic experience of God or revelation of Jesus.

Let me assure you that you are one of Jesus' sheep. You may not realize it, but you are here because Jesus' voice has brought you. You may hear the voice of the Lord in a variety of ways. It may be a simple sense that you should be here. It may be a friend, a spouse, a sister, or a child who tugs your heart and gets you here. No matter what, you are here because in one form or another, you have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd.

There's an evangelist named Andrew Weeks who leads conferences about being a magnetic church. When he speaks he usually explains how he became an evangelist.

He began attending church not because of faith. He began attending church because he was lonely. He had just moved to Providence, Rhode Island, where he was a new plant manager. When he was growing up, his family had never attended church, but he was single, new in town, and he felt like the church might be a family to him. After a few weeks of living in Providence, he decided it was time to find a church.

When he arrived at a church he picked simply because he knew where it was – it was on his way to work – he was met in the hallway by an older man who introduced himself. The man went on to say, "My grandparents came to this church. My parents came to this church. My wife and I have come to this church all our lives, and now my five grown children attend this church with their children. We are honored that you have come to worship with us this morning." Well, Andrew Weeks said that he knew he would be coming back to this church and his new family.

The interesting thing is that for ten or so years, Andrew Weeks went to church, participating in the choir and serving as the church treasurer, but he wasn't a believer. That didn't matter to him. He came because the church was his family.

As a member of the choir, Andy Weeks attended and sang at three services one Easter morning. By the third service, his attention was not on the service. Suddenly during the communion, Andy Weeks noticed that there was silence in the sanctuary. He looked up and he saw a vision. He saw three figures, surrounded by light. The two on the outside were bathed in light, but the one in the middle was the source of the light; it was Jesus. The vision only lasted a few seconds, but Andy Weeks has never been the same. He went to church that day prepared to hear the story of the resurrection; he came out of the church a witness to the resurrection.

Very few people will ever experience a vision like Andy Weeks did, but we are all called in our own way by the voice of Jesus Christ. We may come to church for years before we find our faith, but the faith is within us already and the Lord calls us to live according to the potential our faith gives us.

A few minutes ago we welcomed Scott and Betty Brown into Geneva. When they meet with the session and deacons last week, Scott told us how they came to Geneva. His journey began with prayer. He prayed harder than he had ever prayed in his life. He felt Jesus leading him every step of the way. Jesus brought him here and we are overjoyed to fold him in our love, the love of Christ.

The second thing I want to talk about is that Jesus promises us eternal life. Our lives are so blessed that we don't look forward to eternal life. We like life here just fine. What can heaven offer us?

There is another way to look at heaven. What heaven represents to me is the profound truth that there is something glorious beyond this life. It gives me a broader perspective. The answer to the question, "Is that all there is?" is a resounding "No!" There is more. Knowing about eternal life means that the values of the world are not the ultimate standard. The Lord has given us a new standard; the ultimate commandment is that we love God and we love our neighbors as ourselves. And eternal life means that death is not the end. We do not need to fear death.

A few weeks ago, I dusted off one of my favorite books *The Gift of Peace* by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. In it he mentions that people often asked him about heaven and the afterlife.

I sometimes smile at the request because I do not know any more than they do. Yet, when one young man asked if I looked forward to being united with God and all those who have gone before me, I made a connection...The first time I traveled with my mother and sister to my parents' homeland...in northern Italy, I felt as if I had been there before. After years of looking through my mother's photo albums, I knew the mountains, the land, the houses, the people. As soon as we entered the valley, I said, "My God, I know this place. I am home." Somehow I think crossing from this life into life eternal will be similar. I will be home. [Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 152]

There is one more thing I want to talk about in this scripture. Jesus says that no one can snatch us out of His hand. We are secure in His care. God may not answer our prayers and requests in the way we want, but God holds us.

In a sermon titled "The Hopes and Fears of All the Years," Craig Barnes shared the following personal story:

[My father] left us when I was sixteen, and once he left, he never stopped running. Every time we tried to find him, he would only leave and disappear again. He died alone in a raggedy trailer park somewhere in the middle of Florida. A neighboring pastor, who did not know him, spent two days trying to find his family even though he did not know our names.

My Dad missed all of the important events in his sons' lives: graduations, weddings, birth of children, our two ordinations, and both of our Ph.D. ceremonies. He missed all of it. I prayed and prayed that he would return to us. I used to yearn for the day that he would show up in a congregation where I was preaching. My longing was for him to come through the line at the end of worship, take my hand and say, "Good job, son." But he never came. At his funeral, I stared at the casket and wondered what happened to all of those prayers for him. Were they just lying around on the floor of heaven?

When the service was over, my brother and I went to his little trailer in hopes of piecing together something about his life. That was when we received the greatest Christmas gift. Sitting on his kitchen table was a devotional journal in which he had written his prayers and thoughts about various Bible passages. I was relieved to discover that he did not also abandon his faith. But then I came across a dog-eared, tattered page with the title "Daily Prayer List" at the top. The first two items on that list were my brother's name and my name.

I will never understand the lonely madness that drove my father away from everyone who loved him. But I am so thankful to know that to his dying day, he never forgot us. He talked to God about us, even though for some reason he could not talk to us. There was enough grace in that to get me through.

The grace was not that I received what I wanted. I did not find my father in time. The grace was that Jesus never lost him. And for me, the grace was that I then realized, through all of those years of praying for my dad, I was speaking with the Heavenly Father, who will never leave me or forsake me.

No one can snatch us away from God. Amen.