

Eastern North Dakota Synod Assembly – May 3, 2009 Sermon

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“Secure in the Flock”

Imagine if you will, it is the middle of the night. A man sits in the darkness, awake. His name is Duane. Duane sits in the darkness on the edge of the bed. He does not need a light to know what is pictured and written on the plaque hanging on the wall above his head. It is a picture of Jesus holding a lamb with the words “I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”

He recites the words to himself in the dark: “I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” Duane owns a small farm not too far from the river. The waters have been rising, but he has done his work. The sandbags are in place. The pumps are in working order. He is as ready as anyone could be, but it's impossible not to worry.

For Duane, the words of the scripture do not solve the problems of rising waters. They do not promise success in the fight to save his home and his outbuildings, but as he recites the words from John chapter 10, the rhythm and the power of the words bring Duane peace. The Holy Spirit moves. His worries ease a little. His mind still wanders, but he has peace in his soul.

These words of security, spoken by Jesus, are not only for Duane, but for you.

Security-it's a really big deal for us. We want so much to feel secure so we talk about secure borders, secure portfolios, secure homes and of course, secure dikes. The word approaches us from every direction. We turn on the television and hear about economic security, national security, global security, social security.

We like to feel secure, free from risks, and we spend lots of time and money to reach that desired end. We insure our homes, our cars, our lives, even for thousands and thousands of dollars. We invest in our mutual funds, our pension plans. We sign contracts about job and wage security.

And, yet, despite all our best efforts, there's finally no guarantee. We've seen it happen before. Though we invest, insure, and insulate our lives, there's finally no guarantee. In a matter of seconds, it can all be stripped away. Oh how Duane was reminded of that fact. Oh, how we have all been reminded of that fact as the waters went higher and higher, as they spread further and further.

An extremely wet fall, followed by the deep snow from this winter's unusually heavy snowfall began melting causing overland flooding and causing streams and rivers to flood all over the state. Dramatic and traumatic images of floodwaters surging over roads, or inundating houses, or stranding people on the wrong side of the river will be in our minds forever.

We all know stories like these. We know people whose sense of security was suddenly stripped away. Maybe their stories are your story, and in living such stories, we know that life can be anything but secure. Life can be frighteningly fragile.

Today, we hear those words of Jesus that brought Duane comfort in the night. Throughout the 10th chapter of John, Jesus speaks of God's people as a beloved flock and himself as the shepherd protecting that flock from thieves and wolves. Jesus is aware there are lots of wolves. There are powers, principalities and calamities that threaten us as God's beloved flock. But there is one power which is greater, one security which cannot be threatened. That security, powerfully pictured in today's Gospel, is the promise that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and we are His flock.

Dear friends, that is the only real security that we know. Though the waters of a flood can wash away and destroy much that is valuable, flood waters cannot destroy the most valuable: God's love found in Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

That's the good news. In all of life's fragileness, one thing remains strong. You are part of the flock of the Good Shepherd.

So, what does it mean to live in that kind of security? It is this security which frees and even empowers us for action in the world. That's why even after a flood, we can boldly gather as the Eastern North Dakota "Us" around theme, "God's Work. Our Hands." You see, the security that you and I have in God is the very thing that frees us to participate in the work of God to redeem the world. The assurance that we belong to the Good Shepherd's flock is that security which enables us to confront the powers which strive so desperately to snatch God's kingdom from the world. With that knowledge, we can take risks, we can tread into the unknown, we can become involved in the work of God in the world.

We can respond to crisis by sand bagging for a neighbor, dike building for a community, sandwich making for volunteers, praying for people you don't even know, hugging a hurting friend or family member, or giving money to help rebuild lives.

In the 232 congregations of Eastern North Dakota Synod, we declare, day after day, week after week, the power of the risen Christ. Jesus claims the title of shepherd, pledging to look after the sheep, even to giving his life.

In our devotional use of passages like this, we may be tempted to use the words as though they are an elegant Hallmark greeting card from God. God saying, "Hope you're feeling better, here are some lovely words for you..."

But the words of the gospel are a declaration that God gives more than mere sentiment. Easter is the celebration that Jesus of Nazareth, the Good Shepherd did not just come to say kind words and make smooth sentiments. Jesus came to give flesh and blood to the declaration of God's love. The power over death, the authority to forgive sins, the will and compassion to walk with us as a Shepherd, these are not mere sentiment.

Jesus is there for you. Jesus is HERE for you. No matter what happens- the path of the shepherd leads somewhere good.

Remember Duane? In the morning Duane got up. He was not completely rested, but he had rest in his soul. Duane knew he may not be able to save his house from being flooded. He knew he may loss that battle. But Duane also knew he had a Shepherd and that was enough to keep him steady. May the same be true for you.

Amen.