

Sermon for Easter 3 – John 10:11-16

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning I'd like to read you a story. But this story is more than just any story – it's a reflection of the greatest story ever told: It's of Jesus our Good Shepherd. He keeps His promise to lead us out of death to life:

Once upon a time (a real time, mind you, not an imagined one), there was a wolf. He was a fat old thing. You see, he had it pretty easy. Whenever he wanted to eat, all he had to do was walk to the opening of his cave and look at the sheep that grazed right outside.

The wolf would eye this sheep or that one. And then he'd go after it and with little work, he'd grab the sheep and eat away. And the more that he ate, the bigger he grew, and the bigger he grew, the hungrier he became. He was a cruel old wolf; sometimes he'd just poke his head out the door and howl. All the sheep would shiver at the very sound of him. He'd laugh to himself, "Yes, you better be afraid, you poor sheep, because one of these days I'm going to eat you, and it won't be pleasant. Oh, no, it won't. Ha! Ha!"

This big, bad wolf had a scary name. The sheep had only to think of his name and their knees would shake and some would faint. His name was Death. Death was always hungry and never satisfied. He was always eating sheep and always wanting more. And he stank. The very smell of him was worse than his name or his howl. He was altogether dreadful, let me tell you! He was in charge and all the sheep knew it.

There came a day when the wolf was feeling hungrier than usual. He poked his head out of the cave to roar, and he couldn't believe his eyes. Right there in front of his door, almost on his very doorstep was the fattest, juiciest sheep he'd ever seen! He couldn't believe it! He drew in air to fill his lungs, and then he let out a stone-splitting howl. All the sheep who were there ran. They were afraid.

All ran but the one sheep that grazed just outside his cave. That sheep hardly paid attention at all. He kept on eating, as if he hadn't even heard him. The wolf was getting mad now. He came bounding out the door and right up to that bold sheep. Again, the wolf breathed in, and this time he breathed out right in that sheep's face. The sheep looked up and blinked as the odor of decay was blasted in his face. Totally unconcerned, the sheep blinked and then stared.

Now the wolf was getting himself into quite upset. "Don't you know who I am?" he snarled. The sheep looked at him and said: "Yes. I know." And now the other sheep began to creep back at a distance to see what was happening. And they couldn't believe what they were seeing. "Well, aren't you afraid?" snapped the wolf. The sheep looked at Death, that old wolf, right in the eyes and said: "Of you? You've got to be kidding me!" Now the wolf was so full of anger that he spoke through his gritted teeth: "You're in for it now. You're not going to have it easy. I'm going to eat you slowly and painfully." There was a moment of silence. Then the sheep said: "I know."

The other sheep had all been watching because they'd never heard anything like this before. But the moment the wolf pounced they turned away. They were very sad. They had thought – well, they had hoped – it was possible that, just this once, the wolf wasn't going to get his way.

But their hopes were dashed. It was an awful and an ugly sight. The wolf mowed the lamb down. It was slow and it was painful, just like he said. And in the end, there was nothing left. He turned his cruel face, red with blood to the other sheep, and howled in victory. The sheep turned and ran, knowing that the wolf would be back for them one day soon.

As the wolf went back to his cave, he took out a tooth pick and cleaned his teeth. He thought to himself, "I've never tasted a sheep so good! Nothing tough about the meat. Tender. Rich. Satisfying." Then a thought hit him with surprise: it was as though his great hunger had actually been filled. It was a little disturbing. Nonetheless, off he went to bed.

When morning came, the wolf just wasn't feeling like himself. He had a bit of a tummy ache. This never happened. He always woke up very hungry and went out to eat sheep first thing in the morning. He would eat a dozen or so before the dew even left the grass. But not today. His tummy was not good. By noon he was more than uncomfortable. By afternoon, he was positively ill.

The wolf who had brought such pain on the sheep was now feeling such pain himself – and he felt very bad. He kept thinking back to that big bold sheep he had eaten yesterday, the one that tasted so yummy. Was it poisoned or something? He was in such pain that he couldn't even think! He rolled around on the floor of his den and roared in agony.

The sheep heard the sound and didn't quite know what to make of it. But they crept nearer and nearer to the opening of the wolf's cave and listened. What could this mean?

In was sometime in the dark of the night that the wolf let out a shuddering howl. Something was alive and moving inside his stomach! Something pushed and poked and prodded until with a sudden burst, his stomach was punctured and a hole ripped open. And something, rather, Someone, stepped right out of the hole in that huge stinking stomach. The wolf felt like he was dying. And, in a way, he was.

The figure that stepped out of the wolf's belly was totally unknown to the wolf. He looked like a Shepherd. He'd heard of such a one, but never had met one before. With a staff in his hand, the Shepherd walked around and stood facing the wolf. The Shepherd began to laugh. He laughed and his laughter resounded from the opening to the wolf's cave. He laughed and the sheep were filled with wonder. What was going on in there? He laughed and he looked the wolf square in the eye: "So you don't recognize me, old foe? It was I who you ate outside your house three days ago. It was I that you promised would die horribly--and how you kept your promise! But what will you do about me now!?!"

"You?" gasped the wolf. The voice was the same; he recognized it. This Shepherd was the sheep who he had eaten just days ago. "You. But how? Oh, the pain!" The Shepherd smiled and said, "You're pretty harmless now, old foe. Go ahead and try to eat some of my sheep. I promise you that as fast as you swallow them down, I will lead them right out through the hole I made in your stomach. After that, you'll never be able to touch them again!"

The wolf howled in fear and in anger and in rage. There was nothing he could do. The Shepherd had tricked him. It was finished. Then the Shepherd stepped outside Death's cave and called the sheep together. And they knew his voice, too. They'd heard it before. They stood before the Lamb who has become the Shepherd, and they listened as he told them what would happen to them. "You'll die too. The wolf will come out in a few days and be hungrier than ever. He'll swallow you down. But don't worry. I punched a hole right through his belly, and I promise you I'll bring you out again."

That promise still holds true: "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me and I give them eternal life. They shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch out of my hand." Let the old wolf snarl and howl all he will. You know about the hole in his tummy. You know about the Sheep who is the Shepherd. Your Good Shepherd, Jesus. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠