



Kinsley training a lamb for showing at the fair.



"The Troublemaker"

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

"A Dangerous World for Sheep"

Rev. David K. Groth
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[Please note: This version of the sermon has been edited to remove all the video clips taken at the Strobel farm.]

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:20).

In our text, Jesus reveals how dangerous the world can be for sheep. He calls attention to false shepherds neglecting sheep, and thieves and robbers preying on sheep. A few verses later he speaks of wolves attacking the flock and he speaks of the hired hand. He doesn't own the sheep. He's not really invested in them. This day he's watching sheep, the next he might be pruning grape vines. He's paid a denarius a day, minimum wage, and he reckons his life is worth more, which it is, and so when the wolves come, he skedaddles leaving the sheep to fend for themselves. Who of us wouldn't?

So, it's a dangerous world for sheep, and of course, Jesus is comparing us to sheep, which means it's a dangerous world for us. So much trouble out there in the world, so many dangers. We can be harassed by wolves too, on social media, by an abusive spouse, or overbearing parent. We can have the false shepherds of changing cultural values pulling at us, driving us from behind, beating on us, shaming us if we dare step out of line. We can feel

helpless trying to cut through all the bureaucratic tape associated with filing for unemployment, or Medicaid, or a small business loan. Then of course there are thieves who only come to steal and kill and destroy. The devil, of course is one. He targets those who are alone and isolated, those who are sick or injured, those who have “many a conflict, many a doubt” (LSB 570, v. 3).

All we are like sheep, Isaiah says, therefore we all need a shepherd, and not just any old shepherd. We need Him, Jesus. We need the Good Shepherd.

It’s the fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday . . . in the midst of a pandemic. What better time to be reminded of our Shepherd Jesus watching over and leading us?

I went out to the Strobel farm this past week and had the pleasure of visiting with Jana Strobel, along with her daughters Kinsley and Addison, and her father-in-law Larry. They’ve been keeping sheep for years, and they taught me some things about sheep and how to care for them. Jana’s full-time work is as an art teacher at the high school. But Jana grew up on a dairy farm and has been around sheep for the last twenty years or so.

First, she said sheep are highly motivated by food. They’ll go to anyone who has food in the hand, and you can lead them anywhere with food. They compete for food. Jana tossed some grain into the trough and we watched the feeding frenzy and the jostling at the trough, and it made me think of people, actually, jostling for praise at work, or at Best Buy on Black Friday, or in search of tp, sanitizer and now pork in 2020.

Jana has about 35 sheep all told. Each has its own personality, but she doesn’t get to spend that much time with them. Besides, these sheep are not really being raised for their wool. Kinsley’s current favorite is number 4062.

But for Jesus, our Shepherd, this is his full-time work. He neither slumbers nor sleeps. There’s never a time he’s not watching over us, and so he can say like no one else can, “I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” And he calls us by our names (Jn. 10:3).

Kinsley is preparing to show a lamb, which requires daily work to socialize it and make it cooperative as it’s being judged. But sheep usually have other things in mind. The lamb that Kinsley is currently working with wants nothing to do with being led around by the leash. She plants her feet and pulls back . . . immovable. Doesn’t that make you think of God’s ancient people whom he called “stiff-necked and obstinate”?

I asked Jana about potential predators. Wolves and sheep thieves really aren’t a problem in this part of Wisconsin, but coyotes certainly are. That’s why the Strobel’s have an electrified fence around their pasture. “Otherwise they’d be someone’s dinner” she said. Makes me think of 1 Peter 5:8, “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.”

Jana said one reason why it’s a dangerous world for sheep is because they’re just not very bright. She said that repeatedly. It’s not just a bad rap. They’re dumb. They do foolish things. Jana said, “They’ll chew on a metal chain because they can or butt their heads against the concrete wall or accidentally step on their babies, or lie on them, or prevent them from drinking milk. The farmer or shepherd needs to be involved.” She added “These guys are more likely to do something unintelligent that they can’t get themselves out of.” Again, does that remind you of anyone? Ever lie and get caught red handed? Ever get in trouble at work because you clean forgot to do something, or tried to take a short cut and it backfired? Ever put your marriage at risk? Ever get into a financial pinch because of a big impulse purchase?

We think ourselves intelligent. After all, just look at all our technology! And we lift up in high esteem people who are intelligent and computer savvy. “Give them time, they’ll figure this thing out.” But technology will never save us from death. Technology may delay death,

(or hasten death), but it will not save us from death. We still need a Savior. We still need the Good Shepherd.

The Strobel's have a couple of rams at the farm, one of which they call "The Troublemaker." I asked them why? Larry said, "Disposition!" He said the older rams get, the ornerier too. Again, remind you of anyone? Wives – don't answer that!

Larry and Jana have been around a lot of cattle. I asked the two of them, which requires more care— dairy cattle or sheep? They both said dairy cattle for sure, because they need to be milked. However, if you take milking out of it, they believe sheep require more care than any other domesticated farm animal. "Left unattended" Jana said, "they simply would not live very long."

For example, consider their tails. Sheep are born with long tails, but most of them are docked, meaning they are taken off. Why? Sheep cannot otherwise lift the full length of their tails, nor can they clean themselves. If the shepherd didn't dock the tails, the tail would always be wet, full of dung and urine, attracting flies and leading to a plethora of infections and ailments. It makes me think of Martin Luther who said somewhere we would have died a thousand times over in our own filth were it not for our mothers who cleaned us. Of course, it also makes me think of death that comes with the filth of sin, and how we need constantly to be cleansed of it, which only our Shepherd can do for us.

I pointed at one Ewe and asked Jana, suppose a pack of wolves migrated south to Watertown, and managed to separate this one from the flock and was now moving in for the kill. Would you knowingly exchange your life for that lamb? She gave me the straight answer. "Not a chance" she said. She added, however, that she *would* go into the house and get the rifle!

We have a Shepherd who loves us, each of us . . . a Shepherd who knows how dangerous the world can be for sheep, a shepherd who took on our greatest enemies of sin, death and the devil . . . not with a rifle but with a cross. He laid down his life for the sheep. So much he loves us he considered that a trade worth making! Considering how foolish and stubborn and filthy we are, that love is a gracious love.

We don't have anything to offer in exchange for our Shepherd's life. It's all grace.

Sometimes a lamb will find a way out of the fenced in pasture. I asked Jana how it would fare on its own in the woods of Jefferson County, and she shook her head and said again, "That one is as good as dead."

Surprisingly, Jana also told me the one that does escape soon wants to get back in. "They won't go far because they want to be by their friends. They don't want to be alone. So usually they'll galivant around for a short period of time, but then they'll be waiting outside the gate to get back in." Even sheep know they need each other and their shepherd. I do hope we never forget that.

In the Bible God is always gathering his people together. Isolation is not good for the faith, no more than it's healthy for a lamb to be alone in the woods of Wisconsin. Sooner or later, we need to get back together.

That's one of the things I worry about with this pandemic. Our congregation has been scattered by the rules of social isolation. We're staying away from one another, as we should for now. We're doing our best to stay in touch, but this is only a temporary fix. I don't want it to become permanent for you or anyone else. There's something very valuable about being together physically, with other Christians. Maybe you don't need the presence of others nearly as much as they need your presence, your companionship, your faith.

So . . . this is temporary. Keep your eye on the goal of gathering together again and being gathered. That's the movement of Scripture. Ezekiel 34, "For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out . . . I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered" (vv. 11-12).

The wolf scatters the sheep, but God gathers them. I'm reminded of that at every funeral, when we pray an old prayer. "Lord God, our Shepherd, You gather the lambs of Your flock into the arms of Your mercy and bring them home. Comfort us with the certain hope of the resurrection to everlasting life and a joyful reunion with those we love who have died in the faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord."

When we die, we are not scattered to the wind like dust. When we die, it means God is gathering his sheep together. In the end, that's what we want him to do, right? We want him to gather us into his arms and bring us to that joyful reunion with all the saints. That's what he promises in our text. Verse 11, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that you may have life and have it to the full." Thanks be to God!