

**Sermon Manuscript: Acts 20:28-32**  
**A Message for the Good Shepherd's Flock**  
Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 25, 2021

*“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*

*“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” [NIV]*

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It was the summer of 1986. Marita and I together with our friends Greg and Beth, made a trip into the Boundary Waters. Our destination was a place called Malberg Lake. Greg and I had been there a few years before on another trip. There was a beautiful campsite with a sunny beach and some rock ledges surrounded by a fragrant grove of cedar trees. It offered a wonderful sunset view. Greg and I had been talking this site up as we paddled two days to get there. Finally we came around the point and could see the site about a half mile ahead. As we got closer we noticed something odd. There was a tree limb stuck in the sand of the beach with a little flag flying from it. The rule in the wilderness is “leave to trace.” Most people wouldn’t leave something like that. When we finally beached our canoes and could investigate further we discovered that someone had written in 6-foot letters under the flag the word “BEARS.” Needless to say, we took the hint. We appreciated the heads up and returned back down the lake to the next campsite. The unknown strangers had left us an important message that warned us of a big potential problem. We were grateful.

As we continue to learn about “the resurrection life” and the impact of Jesus’ resurrection has on our lives, we come to a message that was first given by the Apostle Paul to our brothers and sisters in the ancient congregation at Ephesus. The words he spoke to the leaders of that congregation also provide a message for us and Christians of all generations. Let’s examine the contents of Paul’s message because it is **A MESSAGE FOR THE GOOD SHEPHERD’S FLOCK**. The message contains a warning as well as vital guidance. Paul tells Christ’s sheep to heed the warning of wolves but also hold on to the connection to Christ.

### **1. Heed the Warning of Wolves**

Like the message of warning that was left for us in the sand on that wilderness lake, the Apostle Paul gives a message and part of it is a warning. Two weeks ago we heard about Paul when he was on trial before the Roman governor Felix and Herod Agrippa II. We learned then how Paul was arrested and brought that trial when he returned to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey bringing money that had been gathered for relief of the Christians in Judea from a great famine. Our lesson today happened during the journey that Paul was making on his way to Jerusalem. As he made this journey, he stopped to visit Christian congregations along the way. Many of them were ones that he had helped to establish. One of these congregations was in the city of Ephesus. Ephesus was near the western coast of Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey. Paul had

spent three years in Ephesus helping to build the congregation. On his journey to Jerusalem, he was traveling by ship. He decided not to actually go into the city of Ephesus because he thought that he would be delayed there because of all of his connections in the congregation. Instead, he summoned the leaders of the congregation to meet him at the sea port. There he speaks words of farewell summarizing his love for the Ephesians and his work among them. He knows that he will never see them again.

As he concludes his words to them, he gives them a message to warn them and to encourage them. He tells these leaders of the congregation to keep watch over themselves and the rest of the members of their congregation. He wants them to know first of all about the threats that will surely come against them. He uses the expression, “savage wolves” to describe the kind of threats that they will face.

Wolves are wily and vicious predators. If they were to attack a flock of sheep, they would seek to divide it up, to scatter it and to pick off the weak stragglers. Paul’s warning to the Ephesian brothers and to all of us is to be on our guard against spiritual predators that seek to divide and scatter and destroy. The threats that would face the Ephesians then were those who would insist that salvation was not found through faith in Jesus alone but rather required obedience to Old Testament rules and laws. Another threat would be those who denied Jesus was truly God or that he had indeed risen from the dead. Another great threat was found in the world that surrounded the Christians where they lived. The attitudes and attractions of the Greek and Roman culture in which they lived held many diversions that could easily choke off their faith. In addition to these, there were all the petty issues that tend to divide God’s people that come from selfishness and pride. Paul had seen these kinds of things in other congregations such as Corinth.

Some of these savage wolves would even arise among the members of the congregation itself. The influence of sin does not stop at the church door. Sinful arrogance can even take God’s truth and twist it so that Christ’s sheep are led astray and scattered. And so the first part of Paul’s message is a message of warning. Watch out for wolves that would divide and scatter and destroy.

Paul’s message of warning is one that we also need to hear still today. The wolves are still prowling and many are eager to distort God’s truth and attack Christ’s people. There are many forces that would scatter and destroy us.

The wilderness of the world in which we live has many things in it that make for a hostile environment. We are constantly pursued and harassed by influences and temptations that are constantly telling us that we need to have more – more money, more pleasure, more sex, more fun, more freedom from anyone telling us what we should do. We are constantly chased to run after being happy when we will never find it. The devil is a predator who stalks us and looks for prey to devour. As Jesus said in his parable of the sower, *“The worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke (faith), making it unfruitful.”* [Matthew 13:22]

Then there are also the wolves that come in sheep’s clothing. Jesus warned us about these too. They are the wolves that Paul describes here who are people *from your own number (who) will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.* [verse 30] They act in the name of Christ and speak as if they are part of his Church. They may not even realize that they are wolves. One of the great problems that faces the church in our day is Biblical illiteracy. People

claim to be followers of God's word and yet they don't actually know very much about it. They don't regularly read it or study it. They don't know what's in it. The result of this is that many false beliefs are held and often times promoted. Human reason is allowed to trump the truth of God's Word. For example, when people say that God basically loves everyone as they are and would never send anyone to hell, they are denying a clear teaching of Scripture.

While the threat of false beliefs is a very serious one, it is not the most common wolf that is loose in the fold. There is the tendency that we all have to make Christianity about rules that need to be followed. When someone says that to be faithful means that it is necessary to do things in this or that particular way in addition to simple faith in Christ, they are playing the Pharisee and distorting the truth of the gospel.

Another wolf in the fold is the beast of institutionalism. This is the animal that sets its teeth in and would wrench the church away from proclaiming its Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and instead make the purpose to maintain the institution of the congregation. When we as a congregation forget that we are servants of the Good Shepherd and instead twist things around so that we end up being slaves of maintaining the idea of Immanuel Lutheran Church, we are in danger losing what is most important.

Worst of all are the little things that the devil delights in using to divide brothers and sisters in Christ from one another. These also arise from within the church. These are the trivial matters that are allowed to grow completely out of proportion. Congregations of God's people have been divided over things like the color of the carpet or the time of worship service. The devil laughs up his sleeve when such things separate the sheep of the Good Shepherd and threaten their faith in him and their salvation when such things cause them to leave the church.

And so the message of warning that Paul gives for the Good Shepherd's flock must be one that we appreciate. Like that warning about the bears, Paul would tell us to watch out and be sure to go in a different direction.

## **2. Hold on to the Connection to Christ**

How can we overcome the wolves that threaten? We find hope and help in the second part of Paul's message for the Good Shepherd's flock. Paul reminds the leaders from Ephesus that he had warned them by carefully and thoroughly teaching them about Christ and their salvation in him. As he commits them to the God who has saved them through Christ, he reassures these leaders that they are overseers and shepherds of the Good Shepherd's flock. The believers they serve have been bought by the precious blood of Jesus himself. He is the true God who offered himself as payment for all people by washing away our sins. He laid down his life for his sheep. When the wolves are howling at the door, we don't need to be afraid. They may threaten but they can't steal us away from our Good Shepherd who said, *"No one can snatch them out of my hand."* [John 10:28] We are forgiven and we are precious.

Paul now commits the believers and their leaders to God. God's power will protect them. Paul commits them to God's word of grace as well. It is through the word that faith is created and sustained. These are the tools of the Holy Spirit who has made these leaders overseers and shepherds. Through these tools they will guard and defend the Good Shepherd's flock. In the word

is found truth to confront and overcome the falsehoods and distortions that the world and the devil would use to harass Christ's sheep. In the gospel God's people are strengthened and built up. Through the word they receive the inheritance to be among those who are "sanctified." That means they have been set apart from the world and made holy through faith in Jesus as Savior. Through the word, people are made saints. Sin is forgiven. Faith is forged. The saints are safe in the Good Shepherd's fold. Paul's message is to hold on to their connection to Christ.

Even though Paul has never known us, his message still is our source of comfort and strength in the face of the wolves. We too are entrusted to the Good Shepherd's care. We too are committed to God and his word of grace that tells us Jesus is our Savior. We too are built up by that word in our faith. We too share the same inheritance to be among those who are sanctified. We are called saints because Jesus has made us holy because he bought us with his own blood.

As a congregation we have been entrusted with the message for the Good Shepherd's flock. What will we do with it? God has given us an urgent message that needs to be proclaimed. Like Paul's words, the message we have has both warning and assurance. God has passed that message down to you and me through Paul as an inspired writer of God's word of grace. We now hold it in our hands and hearts. I have the privilege and responsibility to proclaim the message as an "under-shepherd" of the Good Shepherd Jesus. Together with the other leaders in our congregation, let us keep watch over ourselves and the rest of the flock. Let us keep ourselves focused on Jesus Christ as our Savior. Let us commit ourselves with the Holy Spirit's help to the word of grace as the good news we proclaim and the guide we seek to follow in all things. May Christ, our Good Shepherd fill us with love and concern for all of the brothers and sisters of our Immanuel flock. Let us work to keep the flock gathered together as Christ's people.

We all have a part to play in that as well. Each of us as a responsibility to grow in the word of grace so we can better defend against the threats that come against us. We will also be better prepared to help each other. When we know someone is struggling with the wolves of sin, temptation and spiritual isolation nipping at their heels, we can reach out. The wolf attacks the sheep that gets separated from the flock as an easy target. Let's be vigilant to notice when our brothers and sisters get drawn away and isolated. Let us reach out in love and with the word of grace to gather them back in. In these days of COVID and the isolation it has brought, this is something that is especially needed. Bring the message of the good news that we are saints whose inheritance is in heaven through Christ to those who are separated or straying. With God's help let us do the work of our Shepherd and keep the flock gathered together and safe in the fold. May God let us be messengers to our Good Shepherd's flock.

We appreciated the message about the bears on the beach that day. Appreciate the message we have heard as part of our Good Shepherd's flock. But more than that, may the Lord grant that he would proclaim that message through us. May we write it in letters 6 feet high. May we keep the flag of Christ flying high. Beware the wolves. But even more, cling to Christ! Amen.