

Text: John 10: 1-10  
Title: Kept Safe  
Date: 04.13.08  
Roger Allen Nelson

When I got in the car to drive home I was already tired, but I had 550 miles to travel. 550 miles of iced tea, peanut M&Ms, and stopping only for that which is necessary; 550 miles of the beauty and the boredom of Iowa and Illinois....

I was already tired when I left the northwest corner of Iowa for the south side of Chicago-land, but I had 550 miles to travel ~ so I turned on the radio.

I quickly discovered that my options were limited to three choices: classic rock, contemporary country, or Christian talk. After listening to Molly Hatchet's "Flirting with Disaster" and "You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet" by Bachman Turner Overdrive, I felt like I was back in high school in the seventies ~ so I tuned in Christian radio.

I should confess that typically I don't listen to Christian radio. I am sure that there are fine choices; and I have dear family friends who have given their lives to broadcast ministry, but I don't even know where to find Christian stations in Chicago. So, I settled back for a couple hours of Christian radio while heading east on Highway 20.

I listened to devotional snippets, preachers and teachers, political commentary, and talk, talk, talk. I listened to callers and commentators and the occasional contemporary Christian pop song ~ which by the way, sounded a whole lot like seventies lite rock.... But, what I noticed was an undercurrent of fear. I don't know if the callers parroted the commentators or visa versa, but the line and language was fear.

They were afraid of liberals,  
afraid of feminists and humanists,  
afraid of others,  
afraid of Hollywood,  
afraid of the ACLU, the NEA, and PETA,  
afraid of the homosexual agenda,  
afraid of Muslims and Democrats.  
Afraid of being snatched up,  
or being led astray,  
or being found faithless,  
or being lost.

Now, maybe this was just a particularly bad day in Christian radio, but when I mentioned this to a friend, he chimed in with a similar experience, only he was surprised by the rancor and undertones of hate.

Somewhere in the middle of Iowa I got all agitated by that spirit of fear and I called a friend and I called my mom to protest and pontificate. Puffed up with pride I announced that I wasn't afraid of Barack Obama or my gay neighbor! So, I drove on with courage, conviction, and an inflated sense of self-righteousness.

But, I am afraid.

In the middle of the night I toss and turn with worries about aging and Alzheimer's, the rising demand for limited resources, the national debt, the economy and ecology in which our children will live, and what I'll do when I run dry of preaching ideas. Or, on some particularly dark nights I join Martin Luther who said, "I more fear what is within me than what comes from without." So, while I may not fear liberals and lesbians, I certainly know what it means to be afraid.

Maybe you do too?

Maybe you are afraid of something that keeps you up in the middle of the night.

Maybe you are afraid of something that keeps casting a shadow in your life.

Maybe you are afraid of what comes next,

or what could be lost,

or what you don't think you can carry one more step.

Now, the relationship between fear and faith is familiar preaching territory ~ maybe too familiar ~ but I invite you to consider this text as one more layer of that landscape. Rather than read this text with an eye to who is in the fold and who is out of the fold; rather than read this text as a warning about thieves and robbers; what if it can be read as an image of deep safety, deep trust, and deep freedom?

It is a marvelous image. A sheep pen of that day was typically fashioned out of boulders that were piled high to make walls and then laced with barbed branches to prevent predators from coming over the top to plunder.

So, the sheep are safely enclosed in rock and thistle with a gnarly, knotted, wooden fence through which they were led in and led out to graze in green pastures by quiet waters. The gentle voiced shepherd doesn't holler or bark or whistle, but he calls the sheep by name and in the comfort of a familiar voice the sheep know to whom they belong.

And the sheep are safe.

And the shepherd is faithful.

And...

And, it may be exaggerated preacher lore, but the image is even richer! It is told that many years ago a biblical scholar, while doing research in the Middle East, ran across a Palestinian shepherd. This shepherd was not a Christian and did not know the Bible, but as a keeper of sheep he was showing off his flock and the penned-in area where they slept every night. "When they go in there," the shepherd said proudly, "they are perfectly safe."

But, then the professor noticed: "Your sheep sleep in that pen and yet the pen does not have a gate on it."

"Yes, that's right," the shepherd replied, "I am the gate."

"What do you mean?" queried the startled scholar.

"After my sheep are in the pen, I lay my body across the opening. No sheep will step over me and no wolf can get in without getting past me first. I am the gate." answered the shepherd

Now, that may not have the hope of, "I am the light of the world."

It may not have the sustenance of "I am the bread of the world."

It may not inspire like "I am the resurrection and the life."

It may not have the pastoral color of "I am the good shepherd."

It may not have the mystery of "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

But, tucked away in this text is another "I am" statement.

*I am the gate for the sheep.*

There is certainly scholarly debate about whether or not Jesus intended here the image of a shepherd who would lie across the entryway to protect his sheep, and it is hard to miss the fluidity of the metaphors in this text. While Jesus is both shepherd and sheep gate, there is also a watchman that opens the gate for the shepherd. And! There is also scholarly debate about the translation of the central text:

*I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.*

Or,

*I am the gate: whoever enters through me will be kept safe.*

But, can we at least say that the fundamental image is of a shepherd who tends and provides and leads and protects and keeps his sheep safe? That while we like sheep are often not very bright, not very quick, bleat too much and stray away too easy ~ with Jesus as shepherd we are loved, we belong, and we are safe.

That doesn't mean that we won't have trouble.

That doesn't mean that sheep won't get cancer, die too early, or battle chronic troubles.

That doesn't mean that life will be all cashmere and cheese cake.

It does mean that we won't be abandoned, forgotten, or alone.

It does mean that the good shepherd goes with us.

It does mean that the good shepherd lays down his life.

It does mean that the good shepherd goes looking for the lost one.

It does mean that none will snatch you out of his hand.

I am a terrible joke teller. They never sound funny when they come out of my mouth; I don't laugh quickly and repeat the punch the line; and this is a barely a joke, but....

Four theologians are standing alongside a train stopped on the tracks between stations. They are looking at a dead body beside the tracks and arguing about what happened to the person. The Lutheran said he jumped from the train and was killed by the fall. The Catholic said he must have been pushed. The Methodist insisted he must have fallen accidentally. But, the Calvinist finally chimed in and

said if he really was off the train, then he had never been on the train in the first place.

One point of emphasis in our Reformed ~ Calvinist tradition is the notion that salvation is fully and finally an act of God's grace. From beginning to end if there is any saving, if there is any ultimate safety, it is God's doing. We're kept safe in God's fold; and as we belong to the Good Shepherd he won't let us be lost, or stolen, or stray unto perdition.

As captured in the Canons of Dordt:

*So it is not by our own merits or strengths but by God's undeserved mercy that we neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in our downfalls to the end and our lost. With respect to ourselves this could easily happen; but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen, since his plan cannot be changed, his promise cannot fail, the calling according to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit cannot be invalidated or wiped out.*

Fifth Point ~ Article 8, adapted

Dear friends, no matter what might befall,  
no matter what's around the next corner,  
no matter what you fear.....  
as we are enfolded in God's pen through Jesus, we're safe.

And its not matter of how tightly we hold on to God but how tightly God holds on to us.  
And the promise of the gospel is the God will never let us go.

So, there is nothing to fear and we are free to live life in its fullness ~ not as a function of courage or naïve optimism, but out of the deep confidence that even in valley of the shadow of death nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ.

You are loved.  
You belong.  
You are safe.

May we live not out of fear but out of that deep trust.  
May we follow the voice of shepherd not out of fear but out of deep gratitude.

Thanks be to God.  
Amen.