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I'm Not Going to Let Anything Bad Happen to You

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John 10:11-18

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

Every once in a while a preacher will get fussed at for being too political in the pulpit. For those days, John gave us chapter 10, Jesus straight up trash-talking the leaders of his day – religious leaders with plenty of political power. He's outright name calling: *bandits, thieves and wolves*. Verses 19-20 suggest the Pharisees thought he meant them. Metaphors are fluid, of course, especially in Jesus' stories. I expect *hired hand* offended them the most.

Shepherd was a biblical reference they would have chosen for themselves: like King David, benevolent caretakers of the Jewish masses. Not a few scholars believe the whole passage in verses 11-18 is a reference to wartime in Jerusalem in the early 70's CE. When the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem, Pharisees abandoned the city and their flock in droves, claimed they went to this other village to get Judaism set up again. In that scenario the Romans are the wolves.

John wrote in the 90's, when times were tough for Christians. The same lineage of Pharisaical Jews still haunted and harassed them, trying to steal them back for their own flock, if you will. But there's no century or continent that can't claim the same. Church history would be a skinny book without the wolves and thieves and bandits, all disguised as shepherds, who turned out to be nothing more than hired hands, in the business of tending sheep for what they could get out of it for themselves.

This time last week I was at the Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. You must go, and you must plan two days to see it. I absolutely believe that one's receipt for visiting the MAAHC ought be one's ticket for getting into the Holocaust Museum a few blocks away. The history of slavery in Europe and the Americas is a history of the Church's complicity in the theft, murder, rape, forced migration and genocide of millions of human beings. Not the passive kind of turn-a-blind-eye complicity either, but the active armed, written-down, bought-and-sold partnership-with-the-empires-of-this-world complicity. For your extra credit reading, please look up The Doctrine of Discovery of 1493.

It takes one trip to a museum to expose the great hypocrisy of my faith. I refuse to spend money at certain businesses for their social or political stances, and yet here I still am – repping for the most corrupt organization in the history of Western Civilization. On a good day, I'm 30% of the way out of church. Museum days, it's more like 85. It is the rest of this text which pulls me back, the heart and gospel in this text. More than I am anything else, more than any other metaphor, the Pharisees are *lambs*. I am *a lamb*.

For all the ways human beings have horrified one another in the name of God, God took it like a beating. Took it like a good parent takes it every time her child is hateful to his sibling. And instead of leaving us to our deserved destinies – the natural consequences of our hatefulness and greed – instead, God chose to save us from that destiny: eternal, unending Death.

For some community work I do, I have occasion to be in court. Last time, I was there with a kid whose life is blowing up – by no fault of her own. She's young enough to still seem childlike but old enough to know she's been betrayed, by the ones who were supposed to protect and keep her. The story isn't finished. There might be redemption. But at court that day, the judge – a tall man in a black robe behind a very high bench – looked at the child and in his huge, deep voice, as factually as it is possible for words to be spoken, he said, "No matter what happens, I promise I am not going to let anything bad happen to you." The child whispered, "Thank you." While I – though composed on the outside – I melted into a puddle of tears on the inside. It was a puddle of relief, I decided later, relief for hearing that there are helpers, the *hired hands*. When we are trying our best to do what is right, we are not on our own.

Because metaphors are fluid, *hired hand* doesn't always have to be synonymous with *thief* and *bandit* and *wolf*. It might also mean *disciple*, the one charged with helping watch and love the sheep in a certain place and time, the one who knows full well about the gatekeeper just beyond the next hill who welcomes all – sheep, shepherds, and hired hands alike – into the everlasting safety and security of the fold. All of which might be well and good enough, were it not for the unfinished business I mentioned at the outset: the hills of history covered with the carcasses of sheep and lambs for whom the sentence "I promise nothing bad is going to happen to you" is a string of lies.

Into certain rivers of Costa Rica there washes a kind of sand that is used to make a kind of tile that rich people use in their houses. The sand is extra fine, and technology is scarce in Costa Rica, which means it is extracted by teenage boys who dive to the river bottom with strainer buckets. They fill the buckets, swim up and hand them to men on the bank who dump them into carts attached to oxen which haul the sand to factories.

In this same region of Costa Rica, grown men and women pick cantaloupe for \$2 a day. But these boys earn \$20 a day diving for sand. Care to guess why? Crocodiles. Really big ones. Because, in that economy the sand is more valuable than teenage boys. Boys like Andy and Tucker, only much skinnier, with very brown skin. Crocodiles would like you all more, would think you tastier. But we would never choose tile over you. See, the “anything bad” part of “I won’t let anything bad happen to you” has to be picked apart economically and socially and racially. To be eaten by a crocodile is bad for everyone except the crocodile.

But what’s worse, it seems to me, what must be worse in the realm and heart and mind of God, is straight-faced telling a child that his life, his personhood, is worth less than a few buckets of sand, no matter if the person saying it owns the factory or lays that tile in her bathroom floor.

The divine punishment our people deserve for centuries of abuse and terror and death rained down on the black and brown people of this world is incalculable. And yet, on the last day, we too go to the gate as lambs led by the Good Shepherd who loves us like a good father loves his newborn baby, when she still smells wet and lovely, years and years before she gets big and mouthy and tells him he never did a single thing to help her get into college.

Instead of backhanding us into oblivion, this Good Shepherd takes us by the hand – or the hoof, I suppose – and walks us all the way home with Him. What would this world look like, do you suppose, friends, if we could find in ourselves the humility and the courage to believe that?

Would you pray with me?