

May 8, 2022
Hope Lutheran Church
Rev. Mary Erickson
John 10:22-30

A Powerful Grip

Friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

A travelling circus featured an act with a strong man. He performed several demonstrations of his incredible strength – flexing his muscles, bending metal pipes with his bare hands, tearing phone books in half. In one of his demonstrations, he squeezed half an orange to render all of its juice. Then he challenged one of the spectators from the stands to come forward and try to extract just one more drop of orange juice. “If anyone can, I’ll give them one hundred dollars.” Typically, strong farm boy types came forward to try their luck. But no one ever managed to extract another drop.

But one day, a very unusual figure in the audience volunteered. He was a rather slender man in his early sixties. As he came forward, there was a noticeable tittering from the crowd. It seemed fairly evident that this man had overestimated his ability.

The strong man handed the orange to the challenger. One finger at a time, the man squeezed down on the orange. His arm began to shake from the effort. And then, a drop started to form at the bottom of the orange. It dropped off, and then another drop followed.

The strong man was amazed. “How did you do it?” “Well,” the man said, “I’ve been the treasurer at my church for 30 years. I’ve

learned how to squeeze something from nothing.”

A strong grip. Today we hear Jesus proclaim that no one can snatch his believers from his hand. In John chapter 10, Jesus uses the image of a shepherd with his sheep. A hired herder will flee when danger comes. When the wolf lurks around the flock, the hired hand runs away because he doesn’t value the sheep. But the good shepherd cares for the sheep; he will risk his own life for the sake of his flock. No one will wrest even one little lamb from his flock. He will fight to the death for his sheep, and prevail.

Now the leadership of the Jewish hierarchy have circled around Jesus like a pack of ravenous wolves. They’ve cornered him in the temple area. Is Jesus the hired hand or the good shepherd? Will he flee and save himself, or will he protect his flock, even to his own death?

Well, we know how that turns out, don’t we? Jesus is the good shepherd! He gives his own life to preserve his beloved sheep! Jesus will go all the way to the cross and offer his own life blood. And even then, his strong grip will prevail. Three days later, Jesus will rise victorious over even death!

Friends, no one shall snatch us from the hand of our Savior. Not even sin, not even death! Can I hear an amen?

These religious leaders have encircled Jesus. They’re ready to pounce on him. “Tell us finally – are you the Messiah?” If he says

yes, then they'll jump all over him. If he denies it, they'll ridicule him.

Jesus says that his actions speak on his behalf. Actions speak louder than words. Who else can give sight to a man born blind? And soon he'll raise dead Lazarus from his grave. Who else but the Messiah can accomplish such feats?

The leaders don't recognize him for who he is. They don't know him. They don't know his voice. Jesus tells them that his sheep know his voice. When they hear him, they follow.

Whose voice are you listening to? There are so many voices calling to us. Not all of them are concerned for our welfare. In the Greek Myth the Odyssey, Odysseus and his crew are sailing past the island of the Sirens. The Sirens are a half bird-half human chorus of female creatures. Their song is utterly captivating. Sailors who hear the song will steer their ships towards the island. Their ships will be wrecked upon the rocky shoreline and they'll die.

Odysseus wants to hear the Siren song. He commands his men to tie him to the ship's mast and then plug their own ears with beeswax so they'll be deaf. As the ship sails past the island, Odysseus is captivated by their sweet song. He begs his men to cut him loose and sail closer. But their ears are stopped. They don't succumb to the alluring voice.

There are so very many alluring voices calling to us. But they don't care for us like a good shepherd. Their proof is in their actions.

Today we're overwhelmed by voices of polarization and rage. They're so very loud and we hear them everywhere. Those on the

other side of the political coin are our enemy. Pro-choice and pro-life protesters line up and shout and scream against each other until they're red in the face. Political ads lambast the alternate candidates. Cable news stations of every ilk tell a very tilted narrative as gospel truth.

Their righteous and angry cries are very alluring. But how do their works testify to them? They lead us to automatically judge other people, other souls, without knowing anything else about them but this one aspect. Polarization and rage are not unifying forces. Their fruits are anger and hatred and even physical violence.

And then there are the voices of suspicion and hatred of the stranger. Friends, xenophobia is on the rise! We're stoked by fear of people who are not just like us: people of other races and ethnic groups, foreigners at our borders, those whose gender identity and orientation are not the same as our own.

There are many loud voices stoking fear, demonizing the stranger. But how does this align with the biblical imperative to love the stranger in our midst? Moses reminds Israel, "Remember, you were once strangers in a foreign land." Over and over, Jesus embraced the foreigner, the outcast, the leper, the misunderstood.

And these Sirens of fear and demonization of the other, how do their works testify to them? They lead to hatred; they erode human kindness.

Maya Angelou said, "When people show you who they are, believe them." The actions of these destructive Sirens speak louder than their words. They proclaim their alternate truths, their alternate realities. But

their fruits tell us who they are. When they show us who they are, believe them.

There were two cousins. One cousin grew up and lived in the country; the other one was reared and lived in a big city. One day, the country cousin came to visit his city cousin. The city cousin was very excited to show his country cousin all that the big city had to offer. They toured the magnificent parks and museums. They ate lunch at a fine restaurant. He showed his cousin the large skyscrapers downtown.

As they were walking through the canyons between the tall, tall buildings, the country cousin spoke up, “Hey, did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” his city cousin responded.

“I just heard a cricket!”

The city cousin couldn’t believe it. He listened to the cacophony of the city: horns honking, a jack hammer echoing, busses and vehicles roaring by, sirens blaring in the distance. “I can’t believe it. How can you hear a tiny cricket in the midst of all this noise?”

His country cousin said, “Well, I guess it all depends on what your ears are attuned to.”

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.” Friends, keep your ears attuned to the voice of our Savior Jesus Christ. He has proven his loving intentions and his strength through his works. In his resurrection he showed us that nothing can snatch us out of his hand, not even death. He has claimed you as his own beloved.

You were adopted into his holy family at your baptism. On that day, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, you became a sheep of God’s beloved flock.

Keep your ears tuned to his voice and dwell in the love that flows from his divine heart, the source of all love and life and truth.