

Psalm 23

John 10:22-30

BLESSED ASSURANCE

Several years ago Mickey Rooney was interviewed on television. Mickey Rooney, famous as a child actor, is now on his ninth marriage. His first two wives died - one with cancer and the other as a victim of a tragic homicide. Then followed five unhappy marriages in succession. He has been married to his current wife for more than twenty-five years. "What changed?" the interviewer asked. Mickey Rooney responded, "What changed is I gave my life to Christ. That changed everything. I had lived my life in chaos. I was a millionaire when I was a child. I participated in every form of lust and human degradation. Then, twenty-five years ago, I gave my life to Christ, warts, bruises and all. That has made all the difference."

When Christ Jesus enters into a person's life, he brings to that person peace and security, even in the midst of change. Our risen Lord has a calming influence and can smooth out the troubled seas upon which we sail. Think of our own quest for security. We want to protect ourselves against inevitable (and certainly unwanted) changes and so we surround ourselves with home security alarms. We hope Social Security will remain in existence and that our pension plans will be protected. We strive to make our futures secure with various investment strategies and we hope that the market will grow stronger.

Whether or not our own efforts at security hold fast in the coming years, it is a comfort to have God-given security or "blessed assurance" through the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Someone has said, "Our security is not holding on to God but God's holding on to us." We can definitely have spiritual security because of what Jesus Christ has done for us and offers to us.

In our passage from John's Gospel, we find that one reason for our being secure in the faith is that we belong to Christ. Jesus answered some of the Jewish authorities, who wanted to know if he were the Messiah, by saying, 'You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.' By grace and by faith, we belong to him. We are named and numbered among his many sheep throughout the centuries and for all eternity. Our spiritual security, our blessed assurance, doesn't depend on who we are and what we have but on whose we are. We belong to Christ. We are the beloved people of God.

Some years back, a minister was in a restaurant in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. The dining room was filled with tourists visiting the Great Smoky Mountains, and many were waiting for a table. Since the minister was alone at a table for two, another man went up to his table and asked if he minded if he shared a table. The minister said he was glad to have him. They got to talking, and the minister learned that the stranger was an ex-governor of Tennessee. They started to talk about the church. The ex-governor related how he went to church as a youth, but always rushed out before anyone could speak to him. He explained that he was an illegitimate child and that he did not know who his father was. He was afraid someone would ask him who his father was. One Sunday he tried to get out of church early, but his exit was blocked by two large

women, who engaged him in conversation. Soon the pastor came up and asked, “Young man, whose son are you?” While he was trying to find an answer, the pastor said, “Well, son, I’ll tell you. You are a child of God.” (John R. Brokhoff, *The Case of the Missing Body*, p. 35) Christ died and rose again for us, and we belong to him; and, since we belong to him, we belong to God the heavenly Father for as Jesus tells us all, “The Father and I are one.” It’s important to know who we are, but it’s even more important to know whose we are. And, when we know the answer to that question, we have blessed assurance.

This past week, I was on a four-day retreat with nine other colleagues from the Presbytery of the Peaks at Massanetta Springs. One of our worship services was led by a very creative pastor and, as we reflected on Easter, she invited each one of us to write our own epitaph in twenty-five words or less; then, we went around the room and shared what we had written to sum up our lives. Most of us tried to put in our own words who we were, what we valued, and what we had done. But one of our members simply quoted the opening line of *The Heidelberg Catechism*: “I belong body and soul, in life and in death, not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” That surely is our assurance and our comfort to know that, in life and in death, we belong to God.

Another source of blessed assurance is found in whose voice we hear. In the text for today, Jesus says his sheep hear his voice. And, because they hear his voice, they know him and follow him. In that way, they find spiritual security. Today’s world is filled with many clamoring voices, which vie for our attention. Consequently, it’s easy to become confused and feel like we are being pulled in opposite directions. All I need to say is David Koresh of the Branch Davidians or Jim Jones of Guyana and most of you quickly grasp how important it is to listen to the Voice rather than those other voices that dilute the Way, the Truth, and the Life with their many lies that lead to death.

In contrast, I love the resurrection story the way John tells it. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb that first Easter morning only the gravestone was rolled away and the tomb was empty. She asked One standing there, whom Mary thought was the gardener, where Jesus’ body had been taken. Jesus said to her, “Mary!” and this precious sheep of his own flock heard her name called with ears of faith. She turned and gave her full attention to the risen Lord. Likewise, Luke tells us about two downtrodden disciples, who were walking dejectedly towards Emmaus that same Easter day. Jesus joined them but they did not perceive he was their risen Lord until he was at table with them, and he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. It was precisely then that these two sheep of his flock had their eyes opened, and they recognized him.

Where do we hear the voice of Jesus speaking and calling to us today? He may address us through our hearts, our minds, and our consciences. He may call out to us in the midst of some activity or, as I can attest, through the wise words of others. For sure, he speaks to us through the Word, through the Bible whether in quiet times of reading and reflection or in the context of worship. There is comfort and blessed assurance when he speaks to us and says...“Your sins are forgiven.” There is spiritual security here and now as well as hereafter when he claims, “I am the resurrection and the life.” When we are weary, his voice beckons to

us saying, "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." His voice also commands us to "Follow me." And, in his service there is freedom from insecurity for his kingdom will not fail.

I appreciate the story that took place during the Nazi occupation of Paris. A husky storm trooper stepped into a subway car and tripped headlong over the umbrella of a little old lady sitting next to the door. After picking himself up, the bruised Nazi launched into a tirade of abuse, then bolted from the car at the next station. When he was gone, the passengers burst into spontaneous applause for the little old woman. "I know it isn't much," she said, graciously accepting the compliments, "but he's the sixth one I brought down today. Christ's victory over all lesser lords is our victory as well, and we are to do what we can to follow Christ and help build his kingdom here on earth.

Finally, because we belong to Christ and we follow his voice, we have the blessed assurance of eternal life. In the text from John, Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." We should note the verb tense – "I give" – it's in the present. Eternal life begins now on this side of the grave; it isn't reserved for the life we will live within the heavenly kingdom. Eternal life is granted to us for both now and then. Furthermore, in saying, "I give," Jesus is telling us that life is not something we earn, buy, or deserve. Life is his gift to us.

Physical life is a gift of God. Not one of us decided we wanted to live on earth. Not one of us chose to be born. Who of us made ourselves and put breath into our bodies causing them to come alive? God alone is the creator and giver of life. This is even truer when it comes to spiritual life. If we have eternal life (or authentic life) in Christ, then we have security, for insecurity is based on the fear of death, defeat, and extinction.

This life is permanent, never ending, because it is the life of God, which is shared with us by faith. We have blessed assurance for our security is based upon the security of God. On a Sunday in 1847 a Scottish Presbyterian minister, Henry Francis Lyte, held his last worship service after fifty years as pastor of the same church. Because of ill health, his physician advised him to retire and go to a warmer climate on the French Riviera. After the service, he walked down the hill to a little boat that was waiting to take him to a ship. As the little boat pulled away, he waved to his people with a white handkerchief and they in turn waved back to him. On the first night, they stopped in northern France because tourists wanted to see some of the country. They went to a little French inn and decided that they would have breakfast together the next morning. All except Lyte came for breakfast. They did not know what to make of his absence. A couple went to his room but no one answered. They went to the innkeeper and asked him to open the door. They found his body lying across the bed and in his hand was a poem he had just written. Late the poem was set to music and it is one of our beloved hymns, "Abide With Me." In one of the stanzas, he wrote, "Change and decay in all around I see, O Thou who changest not, abide with me."

We know that God does not change. We are assured in Hebrews 13:8 that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Therefore, we have blessed assurance that we have

eternal life in Christ - before death as well as after death. And we rejoice that nothing but nothing in this life, and not even death itself, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Whenever we are tempted to feel insecure, we need only to remember our risen Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Let us also remember we are the sheep of his flock, who belong to him, who hear his voice, and to whom he has given eternal life. Then with a sense of full security and blessed assurance, we can rise up and say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Therefore, now and forever, let us give glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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