

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT”

Scripture Lesson: John 10: 11-18

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, April 6, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

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.”

Father, Into Your Hands I Commend My Spirit

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

The clearest Biblical definition of faith can be found in Hebrews chapter 11: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

However, this hasn't stopped people of faith from providing their own definitions. For example, John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that faith is "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence (that is, God's goodness) toward us, based on the truth of the freely given promise in Christ."

Faith can be something we know, it can be something we feel, but it is always something in which we trust; and, for Calvin, it was a matter of trusting in God's goodness, even when everything around us suggests otherwise.

Now, there have been a great many moments throughout the course of human history when trusting in God's goodness may have seemed folly—Hitler, periods of genocide, various plagues, the persecution of the early Christians—but this morning, we return again to the cross.

We return to that moment in time when God's goodness seemed to be very much in doubt—a time when trusting in God's provision looked absurd. Jesus, the Son of God, our Good Shepherd, hung there dying on a cross. Yet, in his final breath, Jesus made a profound declaration of faith when he said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

And with that pronouncement—with that very profession of faith—Jesus lets it be known that nothing, not life, not suffering, not even death, is beyond the scope of God's redeeming love.

It is truly remarkable that in a moment so profoundly marked by pain and suffering, words of absolute trust emerge. The words themselves are deeply rooted in the Old Testament, specifically in Psalm 31. When we enter those words into conversation with our reading this morning from John chapter 10, we gain a deeper understanding of what Jesus's declaration meant for his followers, both then and now.

To begin, Psalm 31—portions of which were read by _____ this morning—is a Psalm about trusting in God amid suffering. That's what David was doing when he wrote it. David was surrounded by enemies; his life was threatened at nearly every turn, and nothing about his circumstances was changing anytime soon. Yet, in addition to his words about committing his spirit to God, David was also able to say, with faith, that God was his "fortress."

In Jesus' even more dire situation, when all hope seemed lost and he was about to breathe his last, he outwardly and verbally expressed his trust again that God was faithful.

It was no accident that Jesus chose to speak those words. Next Sunday, our children will be invited to participate in a processional of palm branches at the beginning of each service, which is one way we can gain some sense of what it may have been like when the crowds gathered on that first Palm Sunday and waved branches and shouted "Hosanna!" But barely a week later, we arrive at the cross.

In one week's time, we go from the high noon of Jesus' popularity to the very sunset of his earthly life. At that moment—on the cross—it was not just a physical agony that Jesus felt; it was a moment of complete abandonment.

Two weeks ago, we considered certain other words that Jesus uttered from the cross, specifically the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Oh, if the disciples having fled was not distressing enough, even the heavens seemed to fall silent.

But instead of despair, instead of giving up, Jesus expresses trusting faith, letting it be known that he lays down his life, not as a result of an angry mob choosing to spare Barabbas over him, but as a means of redemption.

And this redemption is made possible because of the power of God—the sole divine authority which can take that which is dead and breathe life into it again.

I stay connected with a variety of groups via Facebook, and I must say that I was more than a little disheartened to run across a post that began like this: "Jesus is not the only way." The post, which was on a page dedicated to church folks, went on to say that "nothing in church history has done as much damage as the idea Jesus is the only way to salvation."

It makes me sad to see people who claim to know what the Bible says neglect the basic theological importance of what Jesus went through on the cross.

For Jesus to say that he is the way—for him to say, as he does in our New Testament Lesson this morning, that with regard to his life, "I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again"—that's not arrogance. It's God!

And it's not only God's desire to love us and to support us, but it is also God's sole and unique ability to provide us with life and life abundant.

Jesus never forgot that. He didn't forget it when the shouts changed from "Hosanna" on Palm Sunday to "Crucify him" on Good Friday, and he didn't forget it when he was about to breathe his last. He always trusted in God's love for him and for the world, and so he said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Those are difficult words for us because they challenge us. And I understand that it can be challenging to trust God when life isn't going well. And goodness knows, life doesn't always go well.

Maybe we are worried about a loved one dealing with the recent fires in North Carolina, or struggling with a broken relationship, or grappling with a serious health matter, or maybe we are worried about a child that isn't making good decisions—there are a lot of things in life that give us reason to not trust in God's ultimate goodness.

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 7:24–25? He said, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock."

Well, the great Charleston earthquake of 1886 put those words to the test. Our church building—this sanctuary, which was constructed in 1814—was a mere 72 years old at the time, but it was nearly condemned.

To say that extensive repairs were needed would be an understatement, and, for a brief time, we didn't know if this lovely and sacred space would be allowed to stand. It was a period of great uncertainty for our church and community, but the people responded with remarkable resilience and unity overall.

Our church family organized fundraising efforts and took the necessary steps to ensure that we could worship here this morning.

Yet underneath all of our resiliency and hope, I believe there was faith—the kind of faith which contributed to our nickname, "The Holy City," which was apparently well enough known that in 1910, Yates Snowden, a journalist and historian, humorously referred to himself as "a missionary from the Holy City."

What I am trying to say is that it is easy to love God when the sun is shining and the weather is fair, but what happens when the storm comes, when the rains fall, when all around our hope gives way? Do we trust in God's goodness and love?

Jesus once said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," and we know that he was talking about the "temple of his body."

God's love is so great that he spared not his own Son but gave him up for all of us—destroyed the temple, as it were—so that we, as the people of God, could endure beyond an edifice, far beyond any earthly treasure. That ours would be eternal life!

When Jesus says, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," they were not just about his personal trust in God. They were words that demonstrated the fulfillment of his mission.

In our reading from John chapter 10, Jesus declared, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

In this way, Jesus was not a victim. We see him on the cross, and cry as we may, this was not an injustice in the way we think about justice today. No! This was love! This was our good shepherd, knowing that we were threatened unto death by the wages of sin, defending us and dying for us.

Those words Jesus spoke were not the words of defeat. They were words of trust. They were words that testified to the depth of his self-giving love.

That's what makes Jesus the way. Oh, other religions may speak of making things right with God, and they may talk about the things that we can try to do to make it so—but only in the faith that God has given to us in Jesus Christ our Lord do we learn that God is the only one who can make that reconciliation possible. And so God makes it happen.

He pays the price—the wages that are due our sin (which is death)—and God becomes the sacrifice, willingly laying down his life for us.

The words Jesus spoke invite us to consider whether we truly put our trust in Him. I mean, when faced with life's uncertainties, do we take matters into our own hands, or do we place our lives in the loving hands of God?

That doesn't mean we don't have a measure of personal responsibility to make a difference in our lives and in the world around us, but it does mean that we are intentionally open to the ways God can change us and reveal His goodness to us, even in difficult times.

What's more, it means that we would yield to God even the most troubling of circumstances, trusting that God can bring about healing and wholeness.

When our spirits are weak and heavy, do we commend them to our Father in heaven? There's an old story about a tightrope walker who strung a rope across Niagara Falls. Before a crowd, he walked across with ease. Then he took a wheelbarrow and pushed it across. The crowd cheered. Then he asked, "Who believes I can push a person across in this wheelbarrow?" Everyone raised their hands. But then he asked for a volunteer.

Faith is not simply a matter of believing that God can offer us courage and peace; it is a matter of trusting in Jesus, who helps us to be courageous and peaceful in the midst of our circumstances.

This is why we can heartily sing the words penned by that great reformer, Martin Luther: "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing."

It is not that mortal ills are magically extinguished, but they will not ultimately prevail. In Jesus, we see the victory that is also ours. In him, we see the ultimate expression of God's love, the depth of his mercy, and the certainty of his promise to never leave or forsake us.

The poet John Donne, when facing his own mortality, wrote a sonnet entitled "Death, be not proud." Here's an excerpt:

"Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so...
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die."

The words of Jesus that we have considered this morning serve to remind us that death does not have the last word. If Jesus could place his life fully in God's hands, then so can we, because we too know that from the cross comes resurrection.

So be strong. Be courageous. Be faithful and trust—trust that in life and in death, we belong not to ourselves but to the God who loves us, the one who lived and died and rose again so that we could also have life and have it abundantly.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.