

Held Tight
John 10:22-30
May 12, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

Daisy the puppy is not really a puppy any more, but just like I sometimes slip up and call one of the girls “sweet baby,” like I did when they were little, we still call Daisy a puppy sometimes. And, to be sure, sometimes she still acts like a puppy. But she has calmed down considerably, and she almost always goes outside to do what dogs are supposed to do outside, and she sometimes even lies beside me nicely on the couch without chewing on my sleeve. We’re making progress.

But, in dog years, she’s still a little kid. She is full of energy, despite our daily walks. She likes to play. She’s a schnauzer, which is a kind of terrier. Her breed is supposed to be good for catching rodents. Andy and I had a schnauzer named Muffett a long time ago, and she was a grownup dog when I met her, but she liked to play, too. But Muffett the schnauzer had no idea how to fetch. We lived in seminary housing, and the kids that lived upstairs from us would come down and ask if Muffett could come outside to play. They would throw a stick, and she would look at them like, “Why did you throw that? Now you’re going to have to go get it.” So we were surprised that when Daisy first came into our lives as a little tiny puppy, she already knew how to fetch. We threw something, and she went to get it. She brought it back. And then she would not drop it. Nor let us take it. Nor give it up at all. No big deal, I thought. She’ll learn.

You’ll probably not be surprised to hear that she did not learn. Daisy still plays fetch in exactly the same way. It doesn’t matter what the object is: frisbee, toy rabbit, rope. She will happily scurry after it, pick it up, bring it right back to me, and then the fun really begins. Because although she will play fetch, keep away is really her favorite game. She’ll bring the toy, and then when you try to grab it, dance away. Then dart toward you again. Sometimes she lets you grab onto it and her next favorite game, tug-of-war, can begin. She pulls and I pull and it goes on and on, until one of us can snatch it away from the other. If I snatch it, I throw it across the room, to initiate the whole sequence again. She fetches, plays keep away, then tug of war. If she snatches it, then we go straight to keep away again. I can see how she would be an effective rodent hunter, because once she has the thing in her mouth, she holds on tight and doesn’t let go. It’s hard to snatch it away from her.

I think I have probably just painted myself into a theological corner, but let's wait and see how it turns out. Keep Daisy in your mind for a minute.

Every year in the lectionary, one of the Sundays after Easter is "Good Shepherd" Sunday. I don't know that it's an official church observance, but there is always one Sunday that combines Psalm 23 with a section from John 10, and preachers around the world pretend to know more about sheep than they really do. Except Beth. Beth knows about sheep.

This section from John 10 isn't quite as simple and straightforward as the other years. Other years get: "I am the gate for the sheep" and "I am the good shepherd of the sheep," with nice imagery to explore. We get something a little more complicated. It's not clear if this is a continuation of the conversation of the preceding verses, or if it happens at a different time. There's a little bit of a scene change at the beginning. John tells us it was the Festival of Dedication, which we know as Hanukkah, a festival that commemorates the reclaiming and rededication of the Temple after it had been desecrated.¹ Then John tells us it was winter, which we would already know, because we know that Hanukkah, or the Festival of Dedication, takes place during the winter. So we are doubly sure what time of year it is when this conversation takes place, but we are not sure at all why it matters that we know that. Perhaps John is just marking time, but then it's unclear why he emphasizes it. We are not alone in not figuring this part out. Nobody else has either.

Then John tells us that Jesus is on Solomon's portico. This has a little more significance. Tradition held that this portico, on the eastern side of the Temple, was where King Solomon presided to render judgments over cases that were brought before him. It was where justice prevailed.² Somehow, and I'm not sure this is completely clear to me, somehow John is signaling to his readers that what Jesus is about to say has to do with the wisdom and justice that was embodied in King Solomon. Jesus as shepherd is similar to King Solomon, has the same wisdom and justice. Shepherd and king are equal, John is implying, which would be—and is—a radical comparison.

In this setting, then, time and place all set out, Jesus gets a hostile question. The tension is increasing between him and the religious authorities. He keeps tiptoeing up to a line but not quite crossing it. Can they get him to say he's the Messiah? Or even worse, can they get him to say that he is God? That will surely be blasphemy, and they can prosecute him and contain the damage he might do.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1620

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1620

So they try to trip him up. Here's the question: "Are you the Messiah or not. Just answer the question. Yes or no."

Jesus does not answer the question with a yes or no. Instead he presents them with this bit of circular logic: "I've told you, and you don't believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me, but you don't believe, because you don't belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me." Somehow, that is supposed to be more clear than "I am the gate" or "I am the good shepherd." Essentially, Jesus is saying: I've both told you and shown you who I am. You don't get it because you're not my sheep. My sheep hear me and they follow me because they're my sheep. If you were my sheep you'd understand, but you don't understand because you're not my sheep.

It's a bit of a frustrating response, and I think Jesus intends it to be frustrating. He feels like he has already answered the question and they aren't getting it because they don't want to get it. So that's what he tells them.

What caught my eye, or my ear, or my imagination this time is the last bit of his answer to the authorities. "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

This is what Jesus has been telling and showing whoever would listen to him. He holds on tight to his sheep, and no one can snatch them away from him. "Snatch" is such a strong verb there, and now here's where I'm going to get myself in theological trouble. I'm about to compare my dog to Jesus. When I read that word snatch and that Jesus holds on to the sheep, holds on to us so tight, that's where my imagination took me. Jesus holds on to the sheep so tight, that nothing can shake them loose. And that's what I picture: Daisy hanging on to her toy so tight, that unless she decides to let me, I can't get it away from her. She is more likely to snatch it out of my hand than I am to get it away from her, in a tug of war. Daisy is a hanger-on-er, a hold tight-er, a...well, um...she's just like Jesus here.

Jesus has earlier described about wolves and thieves who try to get to the sheep and take them away from the shepherd. And he describes how it's the shepherd whom the sheep trust, the shepherd whose voice calms them, even when something is trying to snatch them away.

What it means to be the Messiah, what it means for Jesus to be the good shepherd is this: that Jesus holds on so tight to us that nothing can snatch us away from him. And the religious authorities don't want to hear that. They thought that

following laws were what kept you close to God, and so in effect you could snatch yourself away from God by failing to follow the laws correctly and fully. And so they don't want to hear of a Messiah who holds tight and doesn't let go, because it threatens their whole system and their authority in that system. They're afraid. Afraid of a Messiah who would hold them so that nothing could snatch them away. And they're afraid of whatever might try to snatch them away, at the same time. They're afraid all over the place. But not even fear can snatch us away from Jesus holding us tight.

Then Jesus answers their question in a different way, one that gets him in trouble both in the short term and the long term. He makes it explicit that he and the Father are one, are the same, that he holds tight just the same way that God holds tight to him, that their grip—so to speak—is the same grip and the same strength. Nothing can snatch him away from the Father, because they are one, and no one can snatch the sheep away from Jesus because he is holding tight with all the strength of God.

There's any number of things that might try to snatch us away from the good shepherd. Fear is one, just as powerful an emotion and motivator as it was for those religious authorities. Success and power and prestige might try to snatch us away. Negative thoughts and ideas about ourselves sometimes try to snatch us away from the shepherd's love and protection. On the other hand, arrogance and proud thoughts about ourselves can also try to snatch us away.

Our list could go on and on. The Apostle Paul made a similar list, in Romans 8: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?" And then he answers his own question: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We are held tight by God, held tight in the love of Christ Jesus our Lord, held so tight that nothing can snatch us away. Thanks be to God. Amen.