

April 29, 2007
Rev. 7:9-14, John 10:22-30
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“Saints Alive!”

The telephone rings. You answer it. All the caller has to do is to say your name and you know exactly who it is. It doesn't matter how far you have moved away from your friend or how long it has been since you last talked. When you have been waiting to hear from someone for a long time, you know how special that moment is. When you talk, you pick up the relationship as if no time has elapsed and no distance separates you.

The week after Easter, Bunny and I traveled to Scotland to perform a wedding for the daughter of a minister in the Church of Scotland with whom I had done a pulpit exchange more than ten years ago. We met with some of the ministers in town who were joining churches and beginning to work together in team ministry. We also visited with friends from the Scottish church whom we have known over the past ten years. When we arrived in Scotland, heard their voices and saw their faces, it was as if no time or distance had separated us.

In the 10th chapter of John's gospel, Jesus talks about a relationship that neither time nor distance can destroy. He speaks of himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. He knows his sheep and his sheep know him. They hear his voice and they trust him. They follow wherever he leads.

While we were in Scotland, we stayed with a family who has farmed sheep on the same land for 500 years. Their farm is on heather covered hills overlooking the city of Greenock and the river Clyde. It is an astonishingly beautiful setting. Certainly the setting helps sustain the hard work they do everyday. It was lambing season, the busiest time of the year. If Bunny or I came near the fence, the ewe would stomp her foot and butt the fence to protect her lamb. If we entered the gate to the field, the sheep would scatter. The sheep reacted quite differently to the movements of the shepherd. The shepherd knew the sheep. With a glance, his sharp eye could spot a problem in an instant. The shepherd could move among the sheep, help with a birth, pick up a lamb and carry it to the barn without the same level of distress and confusion. The sheep knew the shepherd and they followed where he led.

Jesus is saying that our relationship with him is like that of the shepherd to the sheep. Jesus knows us and knows our needs. We hear the words of our Lord and we know them to be true. We trust them. Jesus says that he gives us eternal life and no one can snatch us out of his hand.

No one can snatch us out of God's hand.

This relationship cannot be broken. The covenant cannot be broken because God has established this covenant with us in Jesus Christ. As Jesus says, he and the Father are one. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, we not only remember what Jesus Christ has done for us, we also know his presence. We hear his words. Jesus is present with us through the bread and wine as we receive him into our hearts. He is present with us in the worshipping community and in one another as we celebrate this feast together. Surely, this communion tunes our ears to hear his voice speaking through the voices of one another and sharpens our vision to see his face shining in the faces of one another. In this meal, we experience anew the forgiveness of our sins; we are united with Christ and we are welcomed into the heavenly kingdom. In this meal, we come to know what it means to live together at peace with God, at peace with ourselves, at peace with our neighbors and at peace with all of creation.

In spite of Christ's promise that no one can snatch us out of God's hand, we are a fearful and insecure people. God knows how much we struggle, how often we feel lost, how impatient and full of doubt we can become. God knows how we wrestle with sin. We wonder if the evil in our own hearts will overcome us or the apathy around us will wear away our love. We wonder if we will ever see again those we love who have died.

Knowing our need for assurance, the Lord gave John a vision of how this promise would be fulfilled. In the Book of Revelation, John sees a vast multitude of people from every land and tongue standing before the throne of God. In the way that dreams and visions flow and change, the good shepherd has become a lamb like us. In John's vision, the slain lamb has risen victorious. Those gathered around the throne of God are the ones who have come out of the traumas of this life and whose robes have been washed white in the blood of the lamb. The church is given this image to assure us that in life and in death we belong to God. No time and no distance can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. More than that, not even death itself can break the bonds that unite us. There is a direct connection between the feast we celebrate on this day at this particular moment and the victory party that never stops in heaven.

For a moment, hold in your mind John's image of the saints gathered around the throne of God. See the faces of those you love and with whom you have shared this life in the faces of the saints in heaven. In God, there is no death.

Even now as we celebrate this sacrament on earth, the saints who have gone before us are alive in the presence of God. They are with us and we are with them. The saints are all those who love God and put their trust in God their Savior. You are a saint of God. We are saints together. The saints are those who know the shepherd's voice and follow where he leads. We are saints alive on earth and in heaven. Jesus knows each one of us by name. No matter how long the time may seem or how far we have to go, no one can snatch us out of his hand.