**Lays Down His Life!**

**John 10:11-16**

Misericordias Domine – Easter 3

04.18.2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Can you imagine your life being threatened for what you believe, teach, and confess as a Christian? Given today’s cultural climate, that is not so far-fetched a possibility as you imagine. I know of a pastor imprisoned in Canada for leading worship in the church building – he was “breaking Alberta’s Public Health Act by continuing to hold church services when ordered to stop.” You have met pastors who have had friends killed by Boka Haran for being Lutheran-Christian pastors. There are some who are suggesting that the U.S. limit religious freedoms and their freedom of speech.

Today is the day we commemorate Luther’s Confession at the Diet of Worms. No, this was not some Middle Ages form of Lenten penitence which had Luther scrambling to come up with recipes to prepare night crawlers in some palatable manner.

This was an imperial diet; a formal, deliberative, assembly of the Holy Roman Empire called by Emperor Charles V and conducted in the Imperial Free City of Worms. Martin Luther was called to defend or recant, that is, renounce as false, the things he had written against the abuses of the church and papal tyranny. He was being asked to recant the Gospel he had preached and taught which finally brought comfort and certain hope in Christ to consciences which had no such relief previously!

He was called to recant his writing and teachings or be branded a heretic and outlaw, his life forfeit, to be burned at the stake. Luther’s protector, Prince Frederick III, the Elector of Saxony had arranged for Luther to have free passage home no matter the outcome. Luther knew that even this promise made to Frederick would probably be broken. John Hus had been burned alive a little over 100 years before for almost the same teachings.

Knowing his life was forfeit if he did not recant, Luther came before the Diet. He defended his devotional writings, arguing that even some who spoke against him thought them good, right, and salutary. Some written against abuses in the church he could not deny – for if he did the falsehood against which they spoke would continue. For some he apologized, claiming they were a bit harsh in their language attacking individuals, but at the same time he defended the theological content as correct, and would not recant the substance.

On the second day, April 18, 1521, he was required to speak clearly – either recant or not. It is reported that the strain upon him was physically evident. His response, such as it has been handed down to us, is in your bulletin insert. He would stand upon the clear teaching of Scripture alone – on nothing else. “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by clear reason (for I trust neither popes nor councils since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves). I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, my conscience captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything. Since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience, I cannot and will not recant. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand! May God help me, Amen.

Luther understood only too greatly that the false teaching in the church was leading people to rely upon themselves and their own works for their salvation. The people were consciously terror-stricken for they also knew only too well their sinfulness.

They lived in a time when death was a very constant and real threat. Life-expectancy was unknown. If you lived through childhood, you might die at the next onset of the plague when it terrorized your community. There was also the constant fear that the Turks (Muslims) might break into your land.

With the possibility that today might be their last day, their eternal well-being was something they considered greatly. They wanted to be sure that they could stand before God the Judge and enter His paradise.

But what guarantee was there? They knew their sinfulness! Had they done enough penance? Were their works enough? Had they attended Mass often enough? Did they say their prayers with enough earnestness? They could do a pilgrimage and gain points… visit relics and gain points… and indulgences were available for sale so that you could buy your way out of purgatory.

Yes, for speaking out against such things, and pointing people to the sacrificial work of Christ alone for salvation, Hus was burned at the stake.

Luther was teaching exactly what Jesus declared in our Gospel lesson today. God’s Christ purchased forgiveness by giving His life unto death to pay the sacrificial price in blood that is required for forgiveness.

This is also your confidence and hope in the face of your sinfulness. There is your confidence and hope when you realize that you have not always been a faithful witness to the hope that lies within you.

You and I have denied Christ. Maybe we did not do it verbally as did Peter in the High Priest’s courtyard, denying that he knew Jesus, but we have done it just the same by our silence.

We did not pray at a meal because a non-believer was present and we did not want to cause friction.

People used God’s name in vain and we were silent.

When confronted with taking a stand upon our Christian faith or going along with the world, we were silent.

How often do we treat Jesus like we did the really nerdy kids in school? When others picked on them, or spoke nasty things about them, we either least laughed along or kept silent, not defending their good name.

Yes, our sinfulness stares us in the face. What do we deserve from the God whom we have denied – if in no other way than in our silence? Do we deserve that He should remember us?

Even more, do we deserve that this One of whom we were ashamed of should defend us? Should He speak up and say, “This is one of those whom you gave to me, Father! This is one who loves Me, as I have loved you! For this one I lay down my life.”?

No, we certainly do not deserve that! Yet, that is exactly what He does. Jesus declares in our text, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” A bit later in our text He says, “I lay down My life for the sheep.”

He further declares, “For this reason, the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.”

You, He loves! For you He dies! He could have stopped the vile proceedings at any time after He was arrested, but He did not. When the rooster crowed, He knew Peter had denied Him the third time. He could have said, “Why should I give my life for that blow-hard? Despite what I told him, he did it anyway! Why give my life for those who abandoned me in Gethsemane? Why give my life for Todd, who when it becomes difficult, chooses to say nothing so that He does not have to ‘offend someone’ by defending My Word?”

Because of His merciful heart – Misericordias Domine – the merciful heart of our Lord, we cry out to Him. Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy! Lord, have mercy! We appeal to that merciful heart! Misericordias Domini! Misericordias Domini! Misericordias Domini! In answer to our fervent prayer, the goodness of the Lord reaches out to us with the Shepherd's life. The Good Shepherd lays down His life – He gives His life unto death for the sheep. Our Good Shepherd lays down His life for you and me, for the sheep who love to wander.

God in His merciful heart loves you, even in your sinfulness. He looks down upon you with His desire to free you from His righteous wrath. Your merciful Shepherd wants to gather you up. He searches for you, to bring you back into the flock. God, in His grace, takes your sin and places it upon His Son. This Son is the Good Shepherd who willingly gave His life unto death, even death on a cross, for the wayward sheep, the disobedient sheep.

This is the truth upon which Luther stood. This is the truth He declared to a world full of terrified people. He pointed them to their confident hope. He wanted to turn them from themselves, from their works, from their penance, from the pilgrimages, from the pope, and certainly from a piece of parchment they purchased.

Dearly beloved of God, it is my task to lead you to know intimately your sinfulness. But the purpose for that is that you might hunger and thirst for something more – something greater. God’s under-shepherds do this in order that the most joyous news – the Gospel – might be declared to you. “The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep – for His precious little lambs who love to wander – for you!”

Yes, Jesus laid down His life unto death for you – and three days later He rose again. Death had no hold on Him – it has no hold on you. He lays down His life in order to give His life to you.

We gather today not to earn something by our presence here, nor by what we do. We gather to receive the life of the Shepherd unto life everlasting. This time is not our work for Him. We gather that He may lay down His life into us – into our ears – and into our mouths.

He lays down His life into you, unto life everlasting. Thanks be to God in Christ, our Good Shepherd! Amen.