

When you think of a bold, fearless animal, what comes to mind? I did a Google search about it as I prepared for this sermon, and according to *Guinness World Records*, the bravest animal is the honey badger. It’s not real big – a couple feet long, weighs 25lbs. But it hunts venomous snakes like King Cobras and will stand its ground against a whole pride of lions.

But you’ve probably never heard of the honey badger, so what came to mind? Whatever animal you were thinking of, I’m guessing it wasn’t a sheep. I mean, there’s a reason there are no professional sports teams that have “sheep” as their mascot, right? Sheep aren’t valiant creatures. They don’t stand and fight, they run. They aren’t bold, they’re timid and fearful; they spook pretty easily. We even use the word to describe people who are like that; we call them “sheepish.”

And yet that is exactly what we find in the first lesson this morning: Bold sheep. God describes for us believers in the early church who are under attack for following Jesus. And yet they aren’t timid or fearful; they’re bold. It’s a boldness that isn’t theirs by nature; a boldness that comes from the Good Shepherd whom they follow. And since “timid” and “fearful” often describe us, it’s a boldness God would give us through the same Good Shepherd this morning. These sheep aren’t sheepish! They live boldly. They speak boldly. They love boldly.

**<sup>23</sup> On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. <sup>24</sup> When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup> You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:**

**“ ‘Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?**

**<sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth take their stand  
and the rulers gather together  
against the Lord  
and against his Anointed One.’**

**<sup>27</sup> Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. <sup>29</sup> Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. <sup>30</sup> Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”**

**<sup>31</sup> After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.**

**<sup>32</sup> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.**

### *I. Live boldly*

You might remember what happened just before this lesson. Peter and John had healed a crippled beggar in the temple, made him walk again. When they told the crowds that it was the

risen Jesus who had done it, the chief priests and elders arrested them. And Peter and John didn't back down from their testimony: The same Jesus they had killed...God raised him to life as this world's only Savior. That testimony got them death threats. They and the believers with them were now on the hit list of the same people who successfully killed Jesus!

How might you expect them to react? Lock themselves away in fear? Run away from the danger – leave Jerusalem and head somewhere else? But they didn't! Instead, they gathered together and prayed. These sheep weren't sheepish! And their prayer explains why not.

They quote Psalm 2, in which God promised that Jesus' enemies would always be attacking him and his people. But the same Psalm promises it would all be **in vain**. Why? God would use their evil actions for his saving good. The proof they cite is what happened to Jesus himself: Herod, Pilate, the Jews all gathered together against Jesus, and they killed him. What greater evil could there be than killing God's own Son? But God's plan all along was to use that death to pay for this world's sins! What greater good could there be than that?

Now the enemies were attacking again...but what was there to fear? Wouldn't the Jesus who rose and reigns continue to do the same: Turn their evil actions into saving good for his people? Even if they put them to death, wouldn't Jesus turn that into the greatest blessing for them by bringing them to heaven?

It's why we don't need to be sheepish, either. It's true, here and now, we aren't in any danger of dying for our faith. But we live in a world where danger and disaster are par for the course. Hurricanes and health problems, car crashes and market crashes... Evils we don't always see coming and can't always stop from happening. It's enough to leave us living worried and fearful of the next bad thing that will happen to us or our loved ones.

But like the believers in this lesson, you have a Good Shepherd. One who loved you so much that he gave his life in order to save you from the greatest danger that threatened you – your sins and the hell they deserved. He died and saved you from that evil...but then he rose. And now he lives and reigns over this whole universe, and you're his sheep, under his care. Don't you think he'll continue to rescue you from danger? Even if he lets some evil into your life, he'll use it only for your saving good. Even if it ends in death, he'll carry you through that, too...turning it into the greatest good for you by using it to bring you into his eternal fold.

These sheep don't have to be sheepish! We can live boldly, confident under our Shepherd's care.

## *II. Speak boldly*

And we can speak boldly, too. It's interesting, isn't it? Speaking boldly about Jesus had resulted in death threats for Peter and John. And yet what do these believers pray for? Not that God would get rid of the death threats. Instead, they pray: **Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.** They ask God for more boldness to keep on speaking God's Word, in spite of the opposition!

That'd be a good prayer for us to pray, too. Even though our lives aren't in danger, there are still people **taking their stand against the Lord and against his anointed** – still people opposed to Jesus and his message. It surprises us, at first – that people should be so hostile towards the Jesus who only wants to save them. But it really shouldn't surprise us at all. After all, this is what the bible tells us about human beings by nature – we're hostile to God. Instead of

seeing Jesus as Savior, we see him as a threat to our self-chosen thinking and living. Speaking to an audience like that about sin and a Savior can be a scary thing!

And you know this. You know how uncomfortable it is to talk to your loved one who hasn't been in church in ages and tell them it's wrong. How scary it is to call a friend who's sinning to repentance. You know how awkward it can be trying to turn a conversation towards the spiritual with your coworkers or your classmates. You know the fears that rise up in our hearts about how they'll react: Indifference? Anger? Rejection?

Sadly, we also know all the times those fears have silenced us...kept us from saying what needs to be said...kept us from talking about Jesus at all. So, yes, we need to pray, "Enable your servants to speak with great boldness." But first we need to pray: "Forgive us. Forgive us for our selfish fears, and all the times we haven't spoken because of them."

And God answers our prayers. He answered the prayer of the believers in our lesson; the ground actually shook after they prayed! God answered our prayer for forgiveness on a different day when the ground shook – as Jesus breathed his last on the cross. He too had prayed, "Father, forgive" – and then the Shepherd suffered what the wayward sheep deserved in order to make it so. Your selfish fears and sinful silence are paid for and forgiven.

But he still answers our other prayer, too: "**Enable us to speak with boldness.**" The ground might not shake when he does, but Jesus still fills us with this Holy Spirit through his promises that he's with us, that he loves us, that his word does not return to him empty. He fills us with his Holy Spirit through the Word. And as Paul reminded a young Timothy who also struggled with timidity when it comes to speaking God's Word: "God did not give us a Spirit of timidity and fear, but a Spirit of power" – to open our mouths and speak God's Word boldly.

These sheep weren't sheepish! **They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.** Filled with the Holy Spirit, let's do the same.

### *III. Love boldly*

But there's one last aspect of their lives God highlights for us this morning: They loved boldly. Our lesson says: <sup>32</sup> **All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.** The verses that follow describe this in more detail – people selling what's theirs and giving the money to the apostles to distribute to those who are in need.

Can you imagine living like this? Just imagine emptying your bank accounts and giving it to WELS Christian Aid and Relief to help the less fortunate. Imagine bringing your paycheck to church each week and putting it in a fund to distribute among the members and our community as needed. Lending your car, your home, whatever else you have to anyone else who has use of it. What kind of fears might you have as you do? That you might not have enough for yourself after sharing with others? That others might not be so generous when you're in need?

The truth is God doesn't command this "communal" style of living. But he does command us to love as generously and selflessly as they did. To be generous with our offerings – give him the firstfruits, not what's left after we provide for ourselves. To put the needs of others before our own. To love others even though they might not return the favor. And the same kind of fears can keep us from doing this: What if, after giving generously, I don't have enough for myself? If I'm always looking out for others' needs, who's gonna look out for me?

The answer, for them and for us, is the Good Shepherd. They could love boldly – and we can, too – because we have a Good Shepherd. We can give generously, because Jesus has already answered the fear, “Who will take care of me?” “I will,” he promises. “I won’t fail to provide your needs.” We can love others even when they don’t return the favor, because he promises us his love that never fails. We can put others’ needs first, because we have a Good Shepherd who’s always looking out for ours.

Sheep may never make the list of bravest animals. But these sheep have a Shepherd unlike any other: One who died for us and now lives for us. Because of him, these sheep aren’t sheepish - we can live and speak and love, and even die, without fear. God grant that to us all. Amen.