

At 11:03 Tuesday morning, blade 13 (one of the 24 blades in one of the two jet engines powering Southwest flight 1380) snapped off, tearing off much of the engine cowling and sending shrapnel flying into the side of the plane. A window shattered, the masks most of us only know from the pre-flight safety demonstration dropped as the plane began to depressurize, and the plane dropped and banked as the pilot and copilot fought to regain control. Can you imagine what it must have felt like to be on that plane? What emotions, what thoughts would be going through your mind? Imagine the helplessness of being more than 6 miles in the air in a failing machine!

It's a time like that, a time of mortal peril, of danger you can't do anything about that you realize you need help. The passengers could not land that plane safely for themselves. They couldn't simply get off. They were completely in the hands of the pilot and copilot. (And obviously, as we Christians know, they were in God's capable hands too, but more on that in a moment!) What a blessing it was for those passengers that God gave them a crew with the knowledge, skills, and presence of mind to make that landing! Captain Tammie Jo Shults and her first officer managed to make a safe emergency landing in Philadelphia, minimizing the loss of life and injuries.

A tragedy like Tuesday proves just what a dangerous situation flying is. I'm not a particularly nervous flier. Maybe you are. Most people, however, willingly strap themselves into aluminum tubes attached to jet engines and allow themselves to be hurled hundreds of miles an hour for thousands of miles thousands of feet in the air. It's absolutely insane, really! But thousands and thousands of people do it every day without batting an eye! Right now, there are people in the air doing it as we speak! When's the last time you really thought to yourself, "Oh man, I really could use a professional pilot right now?" Commercial pilots are so good at keeping us safe that we often forget exactly how badly we need them!

I don't want to scare you this morning, but we have to be honest. We are in a situation far more dangerous than flying in a plane, right now. And just like we don't really think about the craziness of flight when we're flying, we probably don't realize the danger we're in right now. It's really bad, too! In fact, it's far more dangerous even than being in a depressurized, crippled, and falling 737. The dangers of living in a sinful world are worse than a plane crash.

The Bible frequently talks about people as sheep. Think of how helpless a lone sheep would be in the barren wilderness. That's you. That's me. We're lost in a wilderness that lacks truth. We walk through the valley of the shadow of death and it is full of evil. The devil and his unbelieving pack of wolves surround and attack us from all sides. They aren't content making us feel silly for our belief or just mocking us. They want to actually tear our faith away from us! I've seen enough nature documentaries to know that a lone sheep versus a wolf does not end well for that sheep. It's totally helpless and it's really just a matter of time before the wolf has a nice dinner.

If that's not bad enough, it's not just that we're in a sinful world surrounded by sinful people and the devil attacking us from the outside. Isaiah says we all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way. The attacks aren't all from the outside! Many of our troubles and sufferings come because of our own fault. We follow our own path, to pain, suffering, shame, death, and ultimately that path leads to hell. There is no greater danger! Sheep can't take care of themselves. They need a shepherd to keep them safe, even from themselves. When was the last time you thought "Oh man, I really need a shepherd?" If it's been a while, you need to wake up!

Maybe, like an anxious flyer, you're already horribly aware of the effects of sin in the world and in your life. Maybe you're here today thinking, "Vicar, I already know I'm in trouble! I see the damage sin has done in my life! I see my helplessness! Give me something to hang on to!" Friends, this is why we have Good Shepherd Sunday!

Every year we designate the fourth Sunday of Easter as Good Shepherd Sunday because we need this comforting image. There is no shortage of sheep/shepherd imagery in the Bible. Can you guess which animal is mentioned more than any other? (It shouldn't be too hard at this point!) It's the sheep! In fact, God mentions sheep over 500 times throughout the Bible! Of course, a good number of those times are talking about the sheep that other famous shepherds like Abel, Abraham, and David had, but that in no way takes away from the fact that God loves using the picture of shepherd and flock to talk about how he takes care of us. And take care of us he does! We need to be reminded that **Jesus, our Good Shepherd cares for us**. He cares for us in his amazing love and he cares for us by his incredible power.

That's what we see in today's gospel. The first thing that sets Jesus apart from any other shepherd is his love for us. He says, "*I'm a shepherd*, but not like a regular shepherd." Would you blame a shepherd for saving his life, even if it cost the lives of a couple sheep? Of course not! A shepherd's life is worth far more than, well, how many sheep do you think it would take before you'd say, "Yeah, the shepherd should have died instead of letting those sheep get eaten?" There are few jobs where we would argue someone should die to carry out their duties. The hired hands Jesus describes do exactly what you would expect, and exactly what you could argue they should do! Their lives are worth more than the lives of some sheep!

Think how much truer that is of Jesus! What is Jesus' life worth? He is the one by whom God created the entire universe. Everything that is, was, and ever will be, came through him. It all exists for him. He certainly is worth more than any of us—even all of us together! So, when danger comes, you would expect him to stay safe. You would expect him to value himself more. He doesn't though. Instead, he lays his life down in our place. He dies so that we might live. He died to protect us. What incredible love! This isn't just an impersonal "Jesus died for the whole world" thing either. He says, "*I know my sheep and my sheep know me.*" He knows you—you individually, and he loves you—you individually! He knows your tendency to stray and he gently brings you back into his fold. He knows his plans for you and he knows what you need! What amazing love! Jesus is your Good Shepherd because he cares for you in the greatest love ever seen!

Amazing love can only go so far though. I'm sure Captain Shults didn't want anyone on her plane to get hurt, but it wasn't because she had warm feelings toward the people that saved them. It was that she could do something about it too. If Jesus was simply a guy way back when who loved us, or if he was some semi-powerful God who just was loving towards us, we'd still be in terrible danger. Fortunately, we have a Good Shepherd who also has incredible power: power to take care of us!

When we look at the powers stacked against us, the entire world, the valley of the shadow of death, the devil, unbelievers, and even our own straying sinful tendencies, we know we don't measure up to the challenge of defending ourselves. When we look at our Good Shepherd, we know we have one who can stand up to that challenge. What greater demonstration of his power (and love!) do we need than him willingly laying his life down in our place?! Jesus spoke the words of today's gospel only a few months before his death on the cross. He knew what was coming, and he willingly went to it because he loved us. (Side note:

has anyone ever told you that you are guilty of pounding the nails through Jesus hands and feet? While it's true in the sense that you made it necessary, you did not and could not force Jesus to do that for you. Neither could the Romans. Neither could the Jews. As Jesus says here, *he willingly laid his life down of his own accord. No one took it from him.*) What amazing power! Even more amazingly, Jesus has the power and authority to take up his life again. This is all according to God the Father's plan. God the Father who loved us so dearly that he provided Jesus to be our Savior and Shepherd.

Jesus has complete power over life and death. What further proof can we ask for to show that he has the power to protect us from all our enemies? A few verses after today's reading Jesus says it plain as day: *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."* Our Good Shepherd cares for us by his almighty power!

There are few things more familiar than the picture of Jesus as a shepherd. Just hearing the phrase "Good Shepherd" this morning probably has brought a number of vivid pictures into our imaginations. There are as many paintings of Jesus as a shepherd as there are people here at church and more! There are paintings of Jesus leading a flock to green pastures. There are images of him sitting with his staff watching over his flock. There are pictures of him as a young boy with a pet sheep. One of my favorite pictures growing up was on the cover of a Bible stories book. In that picture, Jesus was leading his flock, and he was carrying one little lamb over his shoulders.

Next time you see one of those pictures, stop and think. Don't just gloss over it as something you already know. Don't just look at it as something nice. Stop and think. Think about what it means to be a believer in a sinful world. Think of all the dangers lurking at every point. Don't forget the immediate mortal danger we are in! You live in a world that could tear you apart any time it wanted to, but you are always under your Good Shepherd's watchful eye. He's there for you. He loves you more than I can even begin to express, and he has power to guarantee that none of those evils, the devil, the world, or even yourself can ever snatch you away from him.
Amen.