

“Good Shepherding”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 27, 2022

8th Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 23

Rev. John Wahl

John 10:11-17

Introduction

Biblical scholar Robert Hoch compares reading from the Gospel of John to visiting an art museum. Upon entering, you are struck by the number and variety of images on the wall. There are large, open rooms with long benches that invite you to sit and linger, to contemplate about the light and colors. If people are speaking, it is in a hushed murmur. Even if you are not an artist yourself, you might have a favorite period, style or medium, which triggers memories and inspires your imagination.¹

In this gospel, we are presented with multiple images of Jesus: light of the world, water of life, living bread. He is the healer of a man born blind and the one who raises Lazarus, his friend, from the dead. Jesus walks on the water and calms the storms. He is the way, the truth, and the life, the vine for the branches, and the good shepherd to the sheep.

In the church where I grew up, there hung a large painting of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, carrying a lamb that lay across his shoulders: an homage to the parable about Jesus leaving the one hundred sheep in the flock in order to save the one that was lost. Hearing either of today’s scripture readings – the 23rd Psalm or John, chapter 10 – evokes that picture in my mind; as I recall the promise that Jesus seeks out everyone – each and every one – to save.

Read John 10:11-18

The Good Shepherd is the second image of Jesus painted in chapter ten of John’s Gospel. Right before these verses, Jesus says, “I am the gate;” the one willing to lay down across the door of the sheep pen to protect the flock, to keep out any predators or thieves. This image serves as a reminder that, for Christian communities, Jesus is the door – not us. It is not our job to keep others out; or make it difficult to enter. No matter how dangerous or different the “other” might appear, we need not close the gate, we leave that up to our Lord.²

¹ Robert Hoch from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*

Thus, when we turn our gaze to look at this familiar image of the Good Shepherd, it is important to see the portrait of Jesus that the Gospel of John is trying to paint. If we're allowed to sit and contemplate on these words, we hear that good shepherding means not only protecting the flock – gatekeeping – but also the act of gathering. “I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen,” Jesus says, “I must lead them too.”

It is so easy, so seductive, for us to convince ourselves that the walls we have constructed will separate us, protect us, and define us. During the course of our two-thousand year history, the Christian church has divided itself into countless different denominations and individual congregations; some of whom we consider to be closer – physically or in beliefs and practices – than others. As an institution, though, we act mostly independently: we choose our own worship times and traditions, we care for our own facilities and grounds, we elect our own leaders and hire our own staff, we faithfully count our own members and attendees. Yes, there are some cooperative ministries and efforts, but most of us hardly know or inquire about what is going on within other faith communities – close by or far away.

But, as we sit and contemplate this image of good shepherding given to us here in this text, we hear Jesus also say about these other sheep from beyond our pen, “they will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd.” This Jesus, the one who carries the single sheep across his shoulders, has not lost track of the other ninety-nine. Everyone – each and every single one – is known by and hears the voice of Jesus. We may not know them, we may not pay attention to them, frankly, we may not even understand or concern ourselves as to their welfare – so wrapped up are we with our own concerns – that we often think of the church defined by these four walls that surround us. This is my church, we believe, because these here are the ones that I see, that I sing and pray and work with, that I consider my friends, and that I love.

But, before we beat ourselves up, it is important to realize that – from the very beginning – this is how the church was formed. Believers in local communities gathered together with their neighbors to form congregations: they opened up their homes and sat down at tables together, they cared for and shared their resources with each other, they nurtured and taught one another's children. They developed rituals and practices that were meaningful and grew familiar. In time, they constructed buildings for worship and fellowship. Regional associations and then denominations were formed. Creeds and belief statements were written. Organizations were created to provide leadership and oversight, to fund mission workers, and to create educational materials. These partnerships and institutions have had innumerable positive impacts: hospitals and schools established, disaster and relief efforts made, evangelism and biblical translation. I first dipped my toe into ministry through a denominational volunteer-in-mission program – at a Presbyterian boarding school in

Utah, of all places – and may well not be a pastor today without the many institutions that supported my journey.

Still, this portrait presented to us today – of Jesus, the Good Shepherd – can inspire our imaginations for something different, something more. For, no matter the particular contours of our congregation, this sheep-fold, there are always others that also listen to Jesus. We may not know, understand, or even recognize them, but they are also beloved by the Good Shepherd, the one who gathers and protects them, who lays down his life for them. If we are, indeed, called to follow in the ways of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, then we must seek – in our particular time and place – to train our ears to listen to the other voices around us, to see our common humanity and concern, and to work toward this prophetic vision of one flock and one shepherd.

This week, our news has been dominated by two large narratives. First, of course, is the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops which has created immense bloodshed and suffering as well as a flood of people fleeing for safety. Sadly, as in so many other points in history, we are witnessing an armed conflict between people of faith. Thus, the worldwide Christian community has joined together to both condemn the violence and vow to assist the suffering. As powerless as we might feel to make any difference, our fellow believers from around the world are stepping out in protest and stepping up to provide relief. Yes, we are called to pray for peace, but also not to close our ears and eyes to the trauma but continue to stand and act in solidarity alongside these sisters and brothers who are trapped in circumstances beyond their choosing or control.

The second over-arching story is that, after two years of the pandemic, including the last two months of a deadly Omicron wave, the astronomical numbers of infections, hospitalizations, and – also, we pray – daily deaths are finally on the decline. Some of us are eager to see some return to normalcy, others are still grieving and adjusting to a changed world. The church, as it always has been, needs to be – at this time – a place where people can seek and find the space and resources necessary for healing. This, of course, will not be a quick or easy process. Again, we will need to keep our ears and eyes open, to be patient, humble and welcoming, to find and develop partnerships in our community, to both open our doors and realize that, in order to truly help, we might need to journey outside of them.

In John's Gospel, this portrait of good shepherding is defined by Jesus being willing to lay down his life for others. Unlike the wolves and hired hands, Jesus is neither predatory nor indifferent; he loves his flock because they are his own. "No one has greater love," Jesus will go on to say later in the gospel, "than to give up one's life for one's friends." (15:13) As the church, we are to embody this love both within and beyond the walls of the congregation. We might not be called to give up our life, but

certainly something that we value: whether time or resources, certainty or assumptions, pride or security.³

As we prepare to enter into the season of Lent, leading us up to and through Holy Week and the story of Jesus laying down his life, we remember that salvation comes not only through this giving up but also taking on. Christ may have been arrested, tortured, and crucified by his enemies, but we profess that he rose again. While the sacrifice Jesus made was not immediately understood, it created something more than any of his followers could have imagined: it gave them the hope of life eternal, and the church – the body of Christ re-created – in which the love of Jesus could be proclaimed and lived out.

Often, we think of Lent as the time for giving up, for sacrifice. But, it can also be a time for taking on, for doing something new, for thinking in a different way. Maybe we promise to reach out in welcome or to offer healing. Maybe we commit to exercise or spend time in nature. Maybe we vow to let go of something or pray more deeply. Some of us, maybe, will follow the devotional “Vincent Van Gogh and the Beauty of Lent,” using artwork to center our practices of mediation and penitence.

Whatever particular practice you choose to take up, I invite you to do so with this portrait of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, in mind. For, in those times when we most need it, we are the lamb that lays across Jesus’ shoulders as he seeks, finds, and carries us to safety. At different times, we are the sheep in the fold; Jesus hears the voice of others – maybe they are hurting or in danger – and he longs to gather them in. What are they longing for? Where can we find them? What might we do to prepare to welcome them in? What in our life might we need to lay down?

Jesus tells us that there is no greater love than this: to open our ears and eyes, to care for ourselves and each other, to be good neighbors. One flock, one shepherd. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: Loving God, your Son came and, like a good shepherd, gave his life for your sheep. Accept our humble gratitude for this act of courage and sacrifice; and help us – in all we say and do – to be more and more like him. Amen.

³ Karoline Lewis, *John* from Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries