

The LORD is my shepherd

John 10: 1-10 / Psalm 23

Cultural Difference

During the Lenten season, I led a Lenten book study group and during our discussion, somehow we talked about “Mary in the Bathtub.” Do you know what this means? My English is fluent enough to know these words, “Mary, “In” “the Bathtub.” I just wondered why people put the statue of Mary in the bathtub. [ppt] Later, Alice Pace explained it to me and I understood what it meant. I even found one while I walked around town. [ppt] I have been in the United States for 15 years but there are many things to learn. Because of cultural differences, simply knowing words isn’t enough to understand the meaning of the conversation or texts. Similarly, our current culture is very different from biblical culture, so to understand the Bible, it's important to understand biblical culture when we read the Bible.

Good Shepherd Sunday

The 4th Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. The lectionary reading for this week always relates to the image of the shepherd. When you hear the word “shepherd,” what image first comes to your mind? [ppt] Maybe this image! A shepherd in spotless blue jeans, leather boots and a nice cowboy hat riding a horse to herd sheep. Of course, we all know that shepherding in Jesus' time differed significantly from the modern sheep industry. [ppt] Maybe we are more familiar with this image of Jesus, gently holding a lamb in his arms with sheep peacefully feeding in a green pasture around him. Perhaps, our image of the Good Shepherd was shaped by David’s famous Psalm 23. When we think of the image of Jesus as our shepherd, the image of Jesus tends to be pastoral, peaceful, and comforting. However, we will meet a different image of Jesus as the shepherd in today’s reading.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.” (1-2)

Central images in the text are the sheepfold, a thief, the shepherd, and the gate. In ancient Israel, shepherds led their sheep to green pastures and water during the day. At night, they brought their sheep into a sheepfold to protect them from wolves and thieves. [ppt] As you can see on the screen, a sheepfold in ancient Israel was a rock wall enclosure of loosely stacked stones with a doorway. The shepherd or the gatekeeper would lie across the opening during the night. So, the shepherd was the gate, just like Jesus said, “I am the gate.” Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate is a thief and a bandit. Jesus contrasted the shepherd with a thief.

The shepherd and a thief

Jesus spoke this ‘shepherd’ metaphor when he got into a skirmish with religious leaders. Jesus healed a man, blind from birth, on a Sabbath day. Instead of praising God for the miraculous healing of this man, the Pharisees investigated the healing and rebuked this man’s testimony, and drove him out. They were obsessed with keeping the law no matter what as well as their own righteousness, so they became numb to the suffering of others. They didn’t care for the well-being of this man, but were only concerned about whether Jesus kept the law or not. When the people heard Jesus speaking about a shepherd and a thief, they would have known ‘who was who.’

Jesus was calling religious leaders, who didn't have compassion for the sick and were only concerned with their religious righteousness, "thieves." Jesus didn't hesitate to call political leaders who were drunk with power, willing to sacrifice the well-being of others for their own benefit, 'bandits.' On other occasions, Jesus called teachers of the law and Pharisees, "whitewashed tombs" and King Herod "a fox." Jesus, our good shepherd, was not always gentle and nice to everyone. Jesus wasn't afraid of getting into trouble, but boldly expressed his holy rage against those who benefited from and sustained the unjust social systems of oppression.

Jesus Christ, our shepherd is not only good but also courageous. With a holy rage, he dared to stand against corrupt religious and political leaders to protect and lead his own sheep. Jesus said, the sheep know the voice of the shepherd and follow him. We are the sheep and the followers of Jesus Christ. It means that we don't just follow Jesus to be comforted and for our own complacency. We follow the way of Jesus Christ and as necessary, we also need to have a holy rage against injustice and evil in the world.

Think of a time when you were angry or upset because of prevailing injustice and the innocent suffering of people. Last year, we were upset with the news of the Uvalde, Texas school shooting. We erected a memorial to show our solidarity with the victims. We also sent petition letters to law makers. I still remember how upset Joan White, who has the most gentle soul I've ever known, was with this news and ridiculous gun laws that enabled this tragic school shooting to happen. Joan and other church council members worked together to prepare the petition letters. Holy rage is an essential part of being Christian. Don't just be nice Christians, but the followers of our shepherd.

Kaj Munk was a Danish Lutheran pastor and a martyr during the Second World War. He was killed by the Gestapo in the dark of the night because of his resistance to Nazism. He wrote a prayer of Holy Rage. It's a bit long but I will read it.

"What is therefore our task today? Shall I answer: "Faith, hope, and love"? That sounds beautiful. But I would say -courage. No, even that is not challenging enough to be the whole truth. Our task today is recklessness. For what we Christians lack is not psychology or literature...we lack a holy rage-the recklessness which comes from the knowledge of God and humanity. The ability to rage when justice lies prostrate on the streets, and when the lie rages across the face of the earth...a holy anger about the things that are wrong in the world. To rage against the ravaging of God's earth, and the destruction of God's world. To rage when little children must die of hunger, when the tables of the rich are sagging with food. To rage at the senseless killing of so many, and against the madness of militaries. To rage at the lie that calls the threat of death and the strategy of destruction, peace. To rage against complacency. To restlessly seek that recklessness that will challenge and seek to change human history until it conforms to the norms of the Kingdom of God. And remember the signs of the Christian Church have been the Lion, the Lamb, the Dove, and the Fish...but never the chameleon." A very powerful and inspiring prayer. Isn't it?

Good shepherd

The sign of the Christian Church has never been the chameleon that changes its colors to simply blend into its surroundings for its own safety. No. We follow Jesus Christ, the good shepherd who leads us in the path of righteousness. Following Jesus doesn't mean that we will not have any difficulty in life. Rather, it means we can find comfort and peace even in the midst of turmoil and challenges because our good shepherd always walks with us.

[ppt] Let us read the Psalm 23 in unison.

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

My Asbury family. Our good shepherd leads us on right paths. Right paths are not necessarily easy paths. Sometimes, we have to go through the darkest valley and live in the presence of evil. But our good shepherd is still with us. Faithfully follow him wherever he leads and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord our whole life long. Amen.