

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

It's Good Shepherd Sunday. You may have heard a hint of that in our Gospel reading today. While the 4th Sunday of Easter always has a reading from the 10th chapter of John's Gospel, today's is a little more obscure than the others. It's not chronologically connected (several months have passed in the life of Jesus), but it holds onto the thematic thread of the shepherd tending their sheep, an analogy for God's relationship with us.

I don't know about you, but I have a very limited understanding of sheep and shepherding. I grew up farm adjacent – that meant living next a corn field and having a few friends who were involved with raising cows or pigs. We used to regularly drive by a small sheep farm and revel in the arrival of lambs every spring, but I'm not too familiar with what it means to be a shepherd or a sheep beyond the references made in the words of Jesus and history of the Jewish people.

But that context matters. The imagery Jesus was invoking for these Jewish leaders and through the telling of this story to the Johannine community are important to the life of the early church and their understanding of discipleship. Perhaps it also matters for our understanding of discipleship thousands of years later, even if we no longer pay much attention to sheep and shepherding. We'll start with the setting of the story, then think about the hearing of this story for the first hearers of John's Gospel, and then think a bit about what it means for us.

The time reference offered for this story is the festival of the Dedication, what is now known as Hannukah. That places it in the Judean winter and at a time when the community is celebrating the restoration of the temple a couple hundred years prior. The Jewish community was in the middle of celebrating the success of their ancestors in reclaiming their sacred home from thieves who had taken it away.

While they were facing the threat of it happening again during Roman occupation.

“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Perhaps more than accusation, we should hear at least a hint of desperation and hope in this question. This was an occupied state that was desperately hoping to be freed by the promised Messiah. But they completely misunderstand the reality of the Messiah. They were still looking for a military conqueror to drive out the Romans and “restore” the temple to glory once again. “I have told you, and you do not believe.”

They can't make the connection between the shepherd-king of their history to the shepherd-Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ.

Fifty years later, after the cross, empty tomb, and ascension, the Johannine community is wrestling with a completely different reality. The Messiah has come, they've heard the story, they're trying to figure out what it means to live out that reality as...now...a marginalized Jewish community stuck between the temple/synagogue tradition and the Roman Empire. The temple has once again been overrun and desecrated. It's no longer the shepherd-king of Jewish kingdom history. It's now the shepherd-Messiah that is rewriting the concept of God's power and work in the world.

"Feed my lambs...tend my sheep," Jesus had told John. Be the shepherd to this community that would be so entirely different than anyone could have imagined. Tradition tells us that this Gospel was written by that disciple, John, but we have no concrete evidence to make that connection. And in truth, it doesn't really matter. What comes out of this story is a community that is grounded in the image of a good shepherd caring for the sheep.

It's reflected in the early art of the Christian community. The image on the front of the bulletin is an example of one such image. It's a picture I took when I had the opportunity to visit a catacomb near Rome. Okay, it's a reproduction outside that catacomb, but it still shows the image that mattered to this early community – stuck between conflicting powers, they held onto this reality...Jesus the Good Shepherd. Jesus, the voice to listen to, the voice to believe, the hand that holds them in the face of those who would snatch them away.

It was them against the world and they were holding onto the image of a God who holds onto them.

We can take that image, we can take the words of Jesus and forget that they're said from the margin – from the place of someone who was going to overthrow the power of this world by the cross instead of a military revolt.

Whenever we lose sight of the cross, the paradox of God's power in weakness and hold onto worldly power and structure, we lose the truth of what it means to believe in **this** Messiah, in **this** God.

It's easier to take these words about who hears the voice of Jesus and who doesn't and point fingers at who we think **doesn't** belong, who doesn't belong to Jesus' sheep. But **belief** in this God means doing what this God has placed before us, not in casting out others.

Belief in John's Gospel is about living the life that Jesus creates for us. It's not about

an intellectual agreement with a concept, it's about living out the confession of Thomas, "My Lord and my God." It's about living out the instruction to Peter, "Feed my sheep." It's about trusting the promise that Jesus made in earlier stories about the Good Shepherd, "I came that [you] may have life and have it abundantly."

That doesn't set us up in an "us verses them" that we can read into this story. We're not told to determine who is the right kind of sheep and who should be excluded. We're told to believe. We're told to trust. We're told to tend to the world. That's why we'll take up a noisy offering (or quiet offering) for world hunger for the next couple of weeks. That's why we work with our Lutheran Campus Ministry partners to feed the hungry once a month. That's why we provide the meal for Hope Dining Room once a month. That's why we openly and proudly proclaim to our LGBTQIA2s+ siblings that they are part of this community. That's why we stand up to cruel and heartless worldviews that dismiss those who are different or less powerful.

Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish." Not because we're supposed to look forward to what happens after we die, but so that we can recognize the abundant life that we have in Jesus. The thief can't snatch that away and we can't be snatched away from that promise. But we can miss it. We can forget to believe. We can fail to live up to that promise because we get distracted by the world's power.

But God's promise is eternal. God's truth does not change. God's Word to us remains the image of a good shepherd who never lets us go and stands with those on the margins and brings all of us, **all of us**, into the Kingdom of God. Today. Right now. Amen.