

**Sermon: Reign of Christ Sunday, November 20, 2016      John 10: 11-18**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

These are unusual times for our world, and unusual times for us preachers.

On the one hand, we are just about to enter the season of Advent and the countdown to Christmas, with its unique and wonderful themes and theological motifs. On the other hand, people in our nation and others are still in bit of a daze, wondering if voters in the USA actually elected the President they did...or is all a dream and we'll be awake again soon. I am just itching to move on to other things, but the news of the day – and our own lingering bewilderment – need us to stay engaged.

My approach to this is to say that now, more than ever, Christians need to embrace the fullness of the call of Jesus Christ, to be people of diligent, mindful, uncompromising love. There is much hatred to be confronted, much misinformation to be countered, much ugliness to be overcome, all of which is at the very heart of our connection to Christ. It seems to me that this upcoming season in which we prepare to invite and welcome Christ's embodied love into our daily lives, couldn't come at a better time.

So, as we turn our focus towards Christ, what does this "Good Shepherd" image from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John have to say to the situation of the day?

This is one of the most frequently-portrayed visual images in religious art. Between stained-glass windows, and Sunday-School lithographs that are framed and mounted in many a sanctuary - including ours, back there in the SW corner – all of us have seen images of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. These images are kind, calming, pastoral, lovely, the gentleness of the sheep and shepherd standing in stark contrast to the turbulence of life.

But there's something else that we know about shepherds, something we are reminded of each Christmas, that gives us pause: shepherds were hated in their culture. If you could have built a wall to keep them out, you would have. They smelled, they stole, they were uneducated and uncouth. Nobody would purchase things from them in the market because they were almost guaranteed to be stolen goods, they were forbidden from grazing their sheep anywhere but the highest land furthest from town, and their testimony was not admissible in a court of law.

So how do we reconcile these two pictures: the deep contempt that people held for shepherds, and the choice of that same image to portray God. It begs the question: if shepherds were so poorly regarded in that culture, why in the world would the gospel of John use the Shepherd motif in relation to Jesus – whether it's a good shepherd, a bad shepherd, or an indifferent shepherd, "shepherd" was a word that would repel its original audience.

I found a most helpful guide for this journey, in an evangelical pastor named Randy Alcorn who has researched how shepherds were regarded in Judaism. In the early days, say 2500 BCE, shepherds were well-regarded in Palestine and the lands east of Palestine: as a nomadic culture, *everyone* in the social structure was a "shepherd" to some degree. Around 1880 BCE, however, there was a drought in the land and people poured into Egypt, including, most famously, the Biblical figure named Joseph and the Israelites, among those labeled 'Apiru or "Hebrew" people by the Egyptians.

Unlike their neighbours to the east, it seems the Egyptians had no use for sheep or shepherds. Sheep were pests who grazed on their crops, nobody needed their wool for clothing because it was so hot most of the time, and, says Randy Alcorn, the Egyptians didn't even like the taste of the meat. Sheep and those lousy foreigners who tended them, were of no use to Egypt.

This might not seem like a huge deal, except for this: the Israelites were in Egypt, not just for a few months or a few years, but for 400 years. In those 400 years, they were constantly reminded that they were not "as good as" the Egyptians – much in the way that African-Americans were derided because of their dark skin and frizzy hair, or Indigenous people in our land were chided for their legends and their languages - and the opinions of these Israelites were constantly being knocked down in favour of the Egyptian way of seeing things. And, as we saw in the recent election campaign, if you hear something often enough, even if it is false or outrageous, it seeps in to your psyche and at some level you might just start believing it. And, sometimes, if you're the one being put down all the time, life starts imitating art and you start to exhibit some of the less-desirable qualities you're already being accused of.

So culturally, it appears that's what happened: shepherds, who were a key part of Israelite existence back in the day, came to have a lower and lower station in life as the culturally-dominant view of things came to over-write what the Israelites had believed. And if we fast-forward to the days of Jesus, it was by then universally understood that shepherds were horrid beings, permanently smelling of sweat and urine and lanoline, uneducated and unprincipled. Things had gotten so bad that, in the words of Joachim Jeremias, the rabbis of Jerusalem asked with amazement how, in view of the despicable nature of shepherds, one could explain why God was called 'my shepherd' in Psalm 23:1. Into that deeply negative milieu, the gospel of John confidently proclaims Jesus as "Good Shepherd".

It is possible that this image was chosen because it was a beloved part of the people's past. By reclaiming that image for Jesus, John is saying, "we can honour our old ways once more." Not in a "let's make America great again" sort of way, more in the way that many African Americans chose to reclaim their African names and the power of solidarity, in spite of what the slave-owners said; or the way that many First Nations in Canada are working hard to bring back their languages and customs in spite of what they were told at Residential School.

So there may be some cultural re-appropriation going on here. More likely, I think, is that John understood something really important about Jesus; that is, those who are most likely to actually hear the call of Christ, are those who need him the most: the excluded, the despised, the derided. The early Church attracted many shepherds, and slaves, and illegal aliens, not to mention women, who encountered this Jesus who was not just willing, but *eager* to be identified with them. They heard the words of a new realm where the first shall be last and the last shall be first, as words of hope specifically for their lives, a lifeline thrown out to them in the midst of daily turbulence. In his amazing poem-set-to-music, Suzanne, Leonard Cohen wrote this:

And Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water...  
 And when he knew for certain only drowning men could see him  
 He said all men will be sailors then until the sea shall free them  
 But he himself was broken, long before the sky would open  
 Forsaken, almost human, he sank beneath your wisdom like a stone

There is much truth in saying that drowning men and women are the only ones who truly recognize the lifeline being thrown to them by Jesus, author and source of new life. While bullies and braggarts have great popular appeal to people who proudly want to see themselves as self-made men and women, the brokenness of Jesus makes him much more accessible to those who understand *their* brokenness. In claiming the image of Shepherd, Jesus may have been reaching back to a formerly-beloved image, or he might just be saying, "Are you fellas despised? Well, I'm with you, then." John is not just arranging a photo-op, posing Jesus temporarily with the folks who live beneath the freeway off-ramp so he can get a picture taken with them; John – and, I believe, Jesus – challenges the supposedly respectable people by saying, "this is where God chooses to live – right here in the shanty-towns and slums, and these, the shepherds and the hookers and the outcasts, are God's best friends. This is where the message of love is actually heard and lived."

// As we read further in John's thoughts about Jesus the Good Shepherd, there is lots more good stuff: this is a shepherd who hangs in there when the sheep are under attack, rather than running away like a hireling. This is a shepherd who, as an early "animal whisperer" of sorts, knows his sheep by name, and they know the sound of his voice. This is a shepherd who would, and did, lay down his life for his flock. These are points for another sermon, but they do underline the commitment that Christ had and has, for any "little ones" who are under attack.

So, what's the take-home this morning? From all these musings on Jesus, the "Good Shepherd," what might make a difference to our lives in these strange days?

1. We meet Christ first in our own places of brokenness: in our experiences of despair, in our memories of exclusion, in self-talk that imprisons us. This is a huge point of encouragement for anyone who is taking those first tough steps to confront addiction, or those seeking healing from long-ago abuse or neglect, or those rebuilding their self-image after in-person or on-line bullying. Christ is not timid or scared off by the wolves or the chill of night or the stench of the sheep-fold; those tough places are home turf.

The Christ who lives in solidarity with detested shepherds, who protects defenseless sheep, who loves and defends 24/7, is met most directly in times of despair. In the hardest times we will face, and the hardest times that will be known by our poorest neighbours, Christ's fidelity is unshakeable, and we need to hear that truth, and own that truth, and speak that truth, and shape our actions by that truth.

2. In addition to meeting Christ in our places of brokenness, we must be willing to meet Christ in our places of strength. When we take the assets available to us, and use them to serve others rather than aggrandize ourselves, we affirm our desire to be disciples of Christ Jesus: supporting all our neighbours in their life's challenges, befriending those not generally recommended as friends, advocating for change when systems or laws oppress those already living on the margins. The assets we mobilize can be our material assets, or it can be our aptitudes and abilities, and even our powers of persuasion. God has placed goodness within each person and in Christ we set that love into positive, life-affirming action.
3. And if we really trust the good news of Jesus Christ, we will allow our whole understanding of strength and weakness to be turned upside-down and inside-out. In a world that is seeing one bully after another ascend to power, and far more effort expended protecting the wealth of the rich than addressing the plight of the poor, we need to say enough is enough. People who feel the living presence of Christ and indeed, all people of good will, need to confront nastiness and stop giving it ever-higher platforms, and we need to do this with more vigilance than we have before. We need to shine God's own light of love into those places where hatred and superiority and privilege think they are entitled to run things. We need to trust things we have known since the day we were born: that acts of love, and fidelity, and forgiveness, and compassion, are what true strength is all about. All other things we call strength are mere impostors.

In his world, about the worst thing you could be, the last person you would admit to being friends with, was a Shepherd. To that challenge, Jesus says, "yeah, I'm good with that. If I've got a choice between hanging out with the shepherds or the self-superior folks who hate the shepherds, I'm not only *with* the shepherds, I am a shepherd." May we rise to the challenges of our day, with that same clarity, and loyalty, and love. Amen.

References cited:

Alcorn, Randy. <http://www.epm.org/resources/2008/Mar/11/shepherds-status/> (includes Jeremiah quote)

Verdal McCallister, Suzanne with Saunders, Kate. <https://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/verdal.html>