

Shepherd and Sheep: John 10:22-30
May 11, 2025, Home Moravian
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INTRODUCTION

As you may have gathered from the readings and music this morning, shepherds and sheep are important in the Bible and the church. We Moravians love the idea that Christ is both the good shepherd and the lamb of God. We have emblazoned this symbol on our Moravian seal where the victorious Lamb is striding forward into the future with us following. When I got to visit the Moravians in Tanzania several years ago, I learned that if you shout out Mwana kondoo ameshinda, which is Swahili for our Lamb has conquered, Moravians will shout back Tumfuate! Let us follow.

But biblical symbols and metaphors can be confusing, especially if you take them too literally. Many years ago, my daughter Sarah asked a pastor how Jesus could be both shepherd and sheep. He laughed at her instead of offering an explanation. He may have assumed she was trying to be clever, which she was from time to time, but she was genuinely confused and felt bad that he had dismissed her question. As the resident theologian in the family, I explained to Sarah that the Bible often uses metaphorical language rather than precise definitions of who Jesus is. In some contexts, like in our psalm today, Jesus is described as the good shepherd who cares for and protects his followers. But in other contexts, like in Holy Communion, Jesus is called the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is compared to the lambs that were offered as sacrifices in the Temple for the sins of the people. But, of course, Jesus Christ was not literally a shepherd or a lamb. They are symbols, but it is fascinating to imagine a sheep who is also shepherd of the flock.

BIBLICAL SHEPHERDS

In ancient Israel, sheep were an essential part of the economy since they provided wool for weaving, skins for tanning, and food for eating. In Old Testament times, priests also sacrificed lambs and sheep to God on sacred

altars. So sheep have great symbolic meaning in the Bible. Jesus often used shepherds and sheep in his parables and discourses even though there is no evidence that he or his disciples ever tended actual sheep. In the time of Jesus, real-life shepherds were lower class workers who were treated rather poorly, but Jesus was drawing of the picture of shepherds in the Old Testament.

In the synagogues, people heard a lot of stories about shepherds from Israel history, beginning with the book of Genesis. The first act of human violence in the Bible was when the shepherd Abel was killed by the farmer Cain who was jealous that God had accepted Abel's sacrifice and not his. John Amos Comenius noted that all violence committed in the name of God can be traced back to this first rivalry over rituals. The biblical patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were wealthy because they had large flocks of sheep, which were tended by their sons and slaves. You may remember that Joseph was tending sheep when his brothers attacked him and sold him into slavery. Years later, the good shepherd Joseph saved the nation from famine.

When the Israelites were oppressed in Egypt, the prophet Moses found asylum in the land of Midian. There he learned to be a shepherd before God him to save his people. As the shepherd of Israel, Moses led his people to freedom and safety in Canaan. The second king of Israel was a shepherd named David who was a musician as well as a warrior. We recited one of his Psalms today, which assures us that the Lord is our shepherd. The kings of Israel were often called shepherds because they were expected to protect and provide for the people. Unfortunately, many of them turned out to be bad shepherd. But this idea that leaders should be shepherds continued in Christianity. The leaders of congregations are called pastors, which is Latin for shepherd. Our Catholic brothers and sisters are celebrating the election of a new pope who is called the pastor or shepherd of the Catholic Church. So, you see, there is a lot of background behind Jesus' use of the word shepherd. In the verses that precede our lesson in John's gospel, Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, and people are questioning him about what this means.

HANUKKAH

Our lesson for today begins with the statement that it was winter, and the festival of dedication was approaching. It includes the delightful detail that Jesus was teaching on the portico of Solomon in the Temple. We know from ancient sources that the porch of Solomon faces to the south, so in winter, it would have been the place with the most sunshine and protection from cold winds. Naturally, Jesus would have chosen that spot to teach. A more important detail is that this story took place during the festival of the dedication of the Temple. Today we know this Jewish festival as Hanukkah, and it was a relatively new festival in Jesus' day. It celebrates the rebellion of Judas Maccabeus that had taken place less than two hundred years before Jesus was born. The festival commemorates a successful revolt against the Greek ruler of Palestine, who was named Antiochus IV.

He believed that Greek culture was the pinnacle of civilization and that everyone else were barbarians who should be forced to give up their language, customs, and laws so they could live like Greeks. Antiochus hated the Jews because so many of them, especially the Pharisees, refused to be assimilated into Greek culture. They insisted on teaching their children Hebrew and the Torah. They refused to offer sacrifices to the Greek gods. They worshiped the one God who created the universe. Pious Jews would not eat certain foods and they did not work on Saturdays, which was the Sabbath. Antiochus was angry that the Jews refused to grovel before him, and he decided to show them that resistance was futile. They would be assimilated into the Empire by force if necessary. Antiochus outlawed circumcision, the reading of the Torah, and other Jewish rituals that he considered foolishness.

To make matters worse, Antiochus claimed that he was the incarnation of the god Zeus. Since he didn't have social media, Antiochus could not put pictures of himself as Zeus online, but he did the next best thing. He erected a statue of himself as Zeus and placed it in the Temple in Jerusalem. There was only one thing that could have offended pious Jews more than this, and that was when Antiochus ordered his priests to sacrifice a pig on the altar in the

Temple. A pig! The most unclean animal in the most sacred place in Jerusalem.

A priest named Judas Maccabeus refused to grovel before Antiochus or follow his anti-Jewish laws. He led a successful insurgency against the powerful Greek army. His followers recaptured the Temple and purified it from defilement. The miracle of Hanukkah was that the oil needed for the ceremony of rededication lasted for the eight days that was necessary for the purification rites. This miracle is still celebrated in Judaism each December.

Many people at the time had hoped that Judas Maccabeus was the Messiah who would restore the kingdom of David. But that didn't happen. After about a century of independence Israel was conquered by the Roman Empire and was ruled by puppet kings and governors. Everyone who was gathered on the porch of Solomon on that cold winter day listening to Jesus knew this story. They would have recently heard scribes reading passages from the Old Testament in which Moses and the prophet told the children of Israel to worship the one true God and not listen to false prophets.

SPEAK PLAINLY

Some of those people were hoping that a new Judas Maccabeus, a new Messiah, would overthrow the hated Roman Empire and purify the Temple again. And then one day a wandering prophet and rabbi from Galilee came to the Temple with a band of fishermen, women, and misfits. In the shadow of the Roman Empire, with soldiers guarding the entrance to the Temple, Jesus told people that he was the good shepherd and that they should be wary of false shepherd. Of course, people had questions. Was Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed One chosen by God to restore the kingdom of David? Was he the next Judas Maccabeus who would trample over the Roman legions? Could Jesus be the Chosen One they were hoping for, praying for?

Jesus sat in the Temple teaching people about the Kingdom of God, but some of his listeners got tired of his parables and metaphors about Good Shepherds and wedding banquets and lost sheep. They were like children in

school who want to skip to the end of class. In frustration, they told Jesus: “If you are the Messiah, please tell us in plain words! If you are who we think you are, tell us straight up. We’re tired of waiting and wondering and thinking.” The phrase translated as don’t keep us in suspense literally means “don’t take our breath away.” Today we might say, “we’re dying here. Tell us once and for all who you are.” You can feel the tension in the air as they pestered Jesus. Who are you? What should we do? Should we follow you or stone you? Should we kill the Romans and purify the temple or run and hide in the wilderness? Who are you?

MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE

Jesus refused to relieve their anxiety. He refused to let them dictate his mission. He refused to get caught up in their energy, their anger, their agenda. Rather than answering their demands, he replied that they would not believe him even if he told them. If you must ask the question, then you will not accept the answer. Jesus told them to look at the works that he was doing and decide for themselves. He was healing people, forgiving people, and restoring the lost. The true Messiah is the Good Shepherd brings peace and healing, not violence, lies, and corruption. The Messiah does not need parades and propaganda and rallies. His sheep hear his voice, and they follow him.

One of the first things children learn, even before birth, is to recognize their mother’s voice. They know their mother because they know her voice, and their mother knows them - just like shepherds and sheep know each other. I remember once when I was a teen-ager, and I was trying to find my mom at Hanes Mall at Christmas time. You can imagine the crowd. I was on the upper deck and looked down and saw her near the escalator. I called out one word “Mom!” And can you believe that my mother was the only person in the mall who looked up. She knew my voice despite all the noise around her, and I knew her. This is what Jesus was talking about. He knows his sheep, and his sheep know him. The sheep may go astray, but they will come when he calls. And they cannot be snatched away by a false shepherd.

CONCLUSION

We are living in difficult and confusing times. There is a lot of noise in the world as people compete for our attention and loyalty. Many people are trying to convince us to turn our backs on the Lamb of God who is also our shepherd. They are trying to convince us that violence, wealth, and power are the path to happiness and security. But if we concentrate, we can still hear the voice of our good shepherd who is our way, our truth, and our life. May we listen to the voice of Christ, the good shepherd who laid down his life for us, calling to us to follow him rather than the influencers, oligarchs, demagogues, and the rest of the would be saviors around us. Mwana kondoo ameschinda. Tumfuate! Let us follow him. Amen.