

The Shepherd Jesus

1 Peter 2:21-25; Psalm 23; John 10:1-16

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Today I want to talk about Jesus. I would rather talk about the inscrutable mystery of God, or the inexplicable power and wonder of the Holy Spirit. But I have lived with today's texts for a while, and I can't escape Jesus. Not Christ. Not the Redeemer and Savior of the world. Just....Jesus.

Other traditions do this better, I think. Or maybe it's just that other preachers do this better than I do. They are unembarrassed about the fact that Jesus is utterly real and present. Not just the God who is out there, somewhere; not the God who blows in the wind and erupts into flame; but the God who is as near as God can be. A flesh-and-blood God who did not just live for a time 2000 years ago, but lives today. And is right here. Immediate, intimate, and close.

So I stand before you today, the good people of Central Presbyterian Church – a body of believers known for thinking about theology and doing social justice and being a public witness – to preach nothing more – and nothing less – than Jesus.

Really knowing who Jesus is in some ways not as simple as you might expect, which may be why we have parables and poetry before us today. When John tells the story, even Jesus tries out all sorts of metaphors to describe who he is. In other parts of the gospel he calls himself a vine, the bread of life, living water, the light of the world. Here, though, he is a shepherd who leads his sheep out to find good pasture; they know his voice and will follow wherever he leads. He is also the gate through which they pass in order to find life abundant, but he quickly returns to the image of the shepherd.

There are not a lot of sheep around these parts, and so a shepherd is probably not the figure we would automatically think of to associate with Jesus. But shepherds were common in the ancient world, and the image was all through the Hebrew scriptures – the bad shepherds were those rulers and leaders who trampled the people in their quest for power and wealth, who fed themselves instead of the sheep, who failed to seek after the lost and the strayed, who ruled with force and harshness instead of kindness and mercy. In the face of their wrongdoing *God* promised, through the prophets, to be the people's *good* shepherd, the one who would rescue them and gather them up, seek the lost, and bring back those who had strayed, bind up the injured and strengthen the weak (Ezekiel 34). Along with this good shepherd who will right all wrongs and restore the people, there is the shepherd of the psalm, who gives sustenance and comfort and safety to each one of the flock, providing every need and pouring out grace beyond measure.

John, of course, wanted his listeners to understand that Jesus was this good shepherd that God had promised Israel, and the image continued to be a compelling one for the early church as well. It was everywhere – you can still see it in a fresco over the baptismal font of the earliest known house church, the shepherd Jesus carrying a lamb upon his shoulders. He is painted in the catacombs and sculpted into statues, he appears in worship spaces and final resting places, as if to say that this shepherd Jesus

guides and protects and provides throughout all of life, at the beginning of life's journey and at the end. And so the image remains even today – in stained glass windows and old tombstones – Jesus, the good shepherd.

It's not hard to *understand* this image of Jesus as shepherd. But I think, in the end, it is a truth that happens to you more than it is something you learn or figure out. In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells about a white man in her church named Ken who was suffering from AIDS and had lost his partner to the same disease. A few weeks after the funeral, she says, "Ken told us that right after Brandon died, Jesus had slid into the hole in his heart that Brandon's loss left, and had been there ever since. Ken has a totally lopsided face, ravaged and emaciated, but when he smiles, he is radiant. He looks like God's crazy nephew Phil. He says that he would gladly pay any price for what he has now, which is Jesus, and us."¹

It is remarkable enough to imagine that a person so broken by death and pain could be anointed with such love that his suffering is overwhelmed by joy. But there is even more to the story. Lamott goes on to talk about a woman in the church named Ranola, who, she says, "is large and beautiful and jovial and black and devout as can be." Ranola had "been a little standoffish toward Ken." Her conservative religious upbringing taught her that folks like him were abominations. But Ken had been coming to church nearly every week for the last year and it was getting to Ranola. "So," writes Lamott,

on this one particular Sunday, for the first hymn, the so-called Morning Hymn, we sang "Jacob's Ladder," which goes "Every rung goes higher, higher," while ironically Kenny couldn't even stand up. But he sang away sitting down, with the hymnal in his lap. And then when it came time for the second hymn, the Fellowship Hymn, we were to sing "His Eye is on the Sparrow." The pianist was playing and the whole congregation had risen — only Ken remained seated ... and we began to sing, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?" And Ranola watched Ken rather skeptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up — lifted up this white rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang. And it pierced me.²

It pierces me, too, this idea—more than an idea—that Jesus can fill a hole that is left by some unbearable loss—and that this good shepherd can cause one sheep to be so overcome with love for an unlikely other that she becomes like a shepherd herself, taking care, giving succor, providing safety in her strong and loving arms.

This is the life to which we are called—what it means to follow the good shepherd, to be part of his flock. To sometimes receive and sometimes give—to know not only in our minds but in our *guts* security in the face of danger, joy that crowds out sorrow, and love that overwhelms fear. It means being led along paths we would not choose for ourselves, to be prodded by the shepherd who knows our needs better than we know our own, to be blessed so thoroughly and so richly that we would not have even known how to ask for it.

Knowing a shepherd like that changes things – it changes us – for to follow this shepherd is to trust – profoundly and completely – that in every circumstance we are

protected and led by the one who stands guard against the worst the world can do. It does not mean that death will not come, that tragedy will not strike, that our hearts will not be broken. But it does mean that whatever befalls us, we may sing this psalm, too:

Even though I walk through the corridors of the ICU, I will not fear death...
Though I pass through the valleys of depression or delusion, I will not be alone...
Though people may taunt me or shun me, I will not lose heart...
Though I sleep in the doorways on Mitchell Street, I will fear no evil...
For you anoint me...guard me...love me....

This is such good news I can scarcely take it in. To be released from fear is a gift beyond words. I know this because I am a specialist in fear. I am afraid of nearly everything – of being alone and of losing the ones who are dear to me; of failing *and* of succeeding; of not being loved, or even liked very much; of falling and flailing; I'm afraid of people I don't understand and places I don't know. I'm not afraid of dying but I am afraid of pain. But then there is this shepherd, Jesus, who promises to meet us in ways we cannot imagine in the most difficult places of life – and death.

A few years ago, before she was moderator, Susan Andrews wrote of seeing this happen with her own eyes. She recalled the time when she was a student chaplain assigned to the cancer ward of a psychiatric hospital for the destitute where, as she put it, "certain death added an extra layer to the human despair."

One day she entered an isolation unit to find a man who hardly seemed human anymore. His arms and legs were nearly consumed by gangrene, sweat poured from his shaking body and a horrible odor encased him. "Dear God," she thought to herself, "what can I possibly say to this man?"

Her prayer was answered as she began to recite the Lord's Prayer, then the twenty-third psalm. As she spoke the familiar words within that putrid room, she watched the man before her change. He stopped shaking. He looked into her eyes and began to speak the words with her. "In that moment," she writes, "he traveled back home, back into the rooms of a long-lost faith. When this child of the covenant died an hour later, he had been welcomed by a loving God who had never left him."³

We affirm our faith in the good shepherd whenever we say this prayer at the close of a funeral, when the whole flock commends one we have loved to the eternal care of God:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior,
we commend your servant.....
Acknowledge, we humbly pray,
a sheep of your own fold
a lamb of your own flock
a sinner of your own redeeming.
Receive her into the arms of your mercy
into the blessed rest of everlasting peace,
and into the glorious company of the saints in light. ⁴

In life and in death, as our ancestors in the faith put it, we belong not to ourselves but

to Jesus. He leads us to the waters of baptism, and the font reminds us that we belong to him and to one another. He sets before us a table of love in face of all the world's pain, and we remember that we are fed along the way, not just for our own sakes but for the sake of others, too. And he gives us this flock....

From womb to tomb, font to grave, on whatever roads we take (or find ourselves on), the shepherd leads us as one flock, gracing us with constant companionship and food for the journey, until he leads us safely home.

As the choir will soon sing, *Lauda*—praise—for what else can we do?

Notes

1. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 64.
2. Lamott, 64-65.
3. Susan Andrews, "At Home in God," *The Christian Century* (April 14, 1999): 413.
4. *The Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), 925.