

Introductory

The LSB lectionary retains the Fourth Sunday of Easter as *Good Shepherd Sunday*. The readings for A, B, and C are all taken from the tenth chapter of John, but different sections. The reading for C year has Jesus at Temple, continuing to use the sheep metaphor to explain His identity and His relationship with his followers. What He has said so far, using the sheep metaphor, has caused a “division among the Jews,” which happens several times in John. Now the division morphs into open, public conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders.

Pastors should know about sheep and shepherds, and not only because that’s who they are. They should know about sheep and shepherds because the Bible talks a lot about sheep and shepherds. Knowing more about sheep and shepherds helps us to better understand the Bible, as well as helping us to better understand who we are as shepherds. Knowing those things, we can pass them on to the flock, helping them to better understand the Bible, pastors and sheep. To state the obvious; you can’t pass along what you yourself don’t know.

As with most research, a good place to start research for shepherding is Wikipedia. William Barclay often quotes from *The Land and The Book* by William Thomson (on Amazon for \$6.50) for insights into Bible times. Talking to a shepherd is another way to learn about them. I once had a very enlightening conversation with a real shepherd when we lived in Montana. Most Americans don’t know much about shepherding because we don’t do much of it. It bears some similarities to ranching, which we know a lot more about, but there are significant dissimilarities.

So Jesus gives us this great metaphor of the sheep and the shepherd, and he throws in the door and the wolf and other shepherding stuff to better communicate truths to His hearers. Go ahead and add to the metaphor, but do not take the metaphor out. The metaphor is a figure of speech. Figures of speech help us to communicate. God uses metaphors and other figures of speech all the time.

We learned about figures at seminary in the context of exegesis, but we did not learn them in the context of preaching, and we should have, but the good news is that it’s not too late. Wikipedia has a very thorough “Figures of Speech” page with lots of links to other pages. I suppose you could buy a book, but why bother when we have Wikipedia and a plethora of other sites.

There is a larger context to the shepherd narrative, beginning with the very contentious 8th chapter. The immediate larger context is that Jesus heals a blind man and the Pharisees don’t like that. They then attempt to convince the man that what had just happened to him hadn’t happened to him; that Jesus had not healed his blindness. It escalates into contact between Jesus and the

Pharisees. These holy and spiritual ones challenge Him, He tells them that they're not blind, but that they do have guilt, which would have been news to them, and it's on.

Textual Notes

22. John uses three nouns to set the context of this sermon – a continuation of another – on shepherds, sheep, and others, placing the timing “τότε τὰ ἐγκαίνια – at the time of the festival,” placing the location “ἐν τοῖς Ἱεροσολύμοις, - in Jerusalem,” and saying that “χειμὼν ἦν – it was winter.” The word “χειμὼν” occurs six times in the NT, and often means what we would call “stormy” weather or simply rainy weather, but almost all of the English translations render the word “winter.” I don't like to translate “χειμὼν” as “winter,” especially in a Midwestern context, because people connect the word with things that are not part of winter in Palestine, but until I find a better word, “winter” it will be.

Around these parts, when we think of winter, we think of snow and wind, of blizzards and snowdrifts. Around Jerusalem, winter means that it rains, and occasionally it snows in the higher elevations, as opposed to “summer,” when rain is virtually non-existent. Go ahead and talk about Phoenix as an example of winter in the context of an arid climate. The average April and May see virtually no rain in Phoenix, and people around here who go to Phoenix in the winter because it's a direct flight from Cedar Rapids will connect to that.

It hardly ever rains June through September in Israel, and what little rain comes, comes in the winter. The rainiest month in Jerusalem is January, averaging nearly five inches annually, about the same average for a summer month in Iowa, and is actually quite a bit of rain. So in Jerusalem, “winter” means that it rains frequently, unlike some months when it rains little or not at all.

This web site is an excellent resource for rainfall and other things; <http://www.findthedata.org/>

The word “ἐγκαίνια – festival” is a hapax in the NT. It was the Feast of Dedication, known to us today as Hanukkah, a festival commemorating the dedication of the second temple. The “third” Temple, “Herod's Temple,” actually an extensive expansion and remodel, was being built during the life of Jesus. During this time, Jesus goes in and out of Temple, ending up in the portico of Solomon, the place where the Rabbis often went to answer questions and to teach. Start your research of Hanukkah at the usual starting point.

23. As John tells the story, he draws us in with new information; new detail. If we come to better understand the layout of Temple, we can pass that understanding on to the hearers, and they will be able to better picture in their mind's eye what is taking place here. He tells us that Jesus was “walking – περιπατεῖ,” an imperfect verb indicating continuous action, and where He was walking “ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ ἐν τῇ στοᾷ τοῦ Σολομῶνος – in the Temple, in the porch of Solomon.”

The word “στοᾷ - porch” describes as a covered area where people would be protected from the sun or the rain.” It seems odd that two-thirds of the way into this sermon John would tell us these details of the time and place of it. One almost gets the idea that Jesus was preaching in the Temple, and it started to rain, much like it will start to rain around these parts in the summer, so

He moves it under the protective roof of Solomon's porch, much like in these parts we would move the picnic to the pavilion. And, as noted above, this is also the place of teaching, so perhaps we have a somewhat subtle johanine double entendre here.

24. In what looks a lot like a scene straight out of *West Side Story*, “the Jews surrounded Him - ἐκύκλωσαν οὖν αὐτὸν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι.” It does not say if they were snapping their fingers, or not. When the Apostle John, who is a Jew, talks about “the Jews,” much like I will sometimes talk about “the Lutherans,” he is talking about the religious leaders who oppose Jesus, their common Messiah. This is not a friendly crowd, and these men of power are deliberately physically intimidating Jesus, and if that sounds over the top remember that these men have determined to physically abuse and kill Jesus, and they will. The conflict, which is already intense, becomes more heated and open as the story unfolds.

And they use the figure of speech known as sarcasm to taunt Jesus, saying “ἕως πότε τὴν ψυχὴν ἡμῶν αἶρεις; εἰ σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστός, εἰπὼν ἡμῖν παρρησίᾳ.- until when will you carry our souls away; if you are the Christ, say it boldly.” The translations mostly get it right; most of them rendering the rhetorical question; “how long will you keep us in suspense?” In common usage, this idiom is meant to express annoyance and irritation at the person at whom it is directed.

One commentator thinks that the jist of their question is something like; “Who do you think you are? God?” Jesus has several times said of Himself that “I am,” the Greek equivalent of God's personal name (Yahweh), and others have called Him “Christ,” but He Himself is not recorded by John to have said of Himself that He is the Christ. Here, in response to their request that He speak to them in no uncertain terms about being the Christ, He does not. Or does He?

25. “I told you, and you do not believe – εἶπον ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ πιστεύετε,” The first verb (told) is in the aorist tense, and the second verb (believe) is in the present tense. I perused some, but not all five hundred thirty-eight NT occurrences of the word “Christ – Χριστός,” and I have asked the Internet, and while several other people refer to Jesus as the “Christ,” and He never disagrees with or corrects them, I do not see that Jesus ever said of Himself that He is the Christ. Nor here, when asked directly, He does not directly call Himself the Christ.

But He does point to the good works that He does in the name of the Father that bear “witness – μαρτυρεῖ” to His being the Christ. You may already know that the number of individuals – all of them falsely – *saying* of self that he is the Christ is legion. Rather than adding His person to that inauspicious list of claimants, Jesus instead lets others do the *saying*, and He does the *doing*, and points to those works as conclusive evidence – not just talk – that He is in fact the Christ, and you can draw your own conclusions from observing those works.

Already, in Chapter seven, the question of Jesus as Christ had come up in a very pointed way. The people had been listening to what Jesus was saying and seeing what Jesus is doing, and (v.25) ask, in wonderment, if this is the man that their leaders want to kill. They express further dismay that the killers aren't interacting with Jesus, and finally wonder if those leaders haven't in fact come to the conclusion that Jesus is the Christ, and that it would be awkward for them to talk to the Christ, whom they are plotting to kill. Would that not be awkward?

Jesus responds to that with words, and the leaders tried to grab Him, but they could not because His “time had not yet come.” Those in the crowd believed in Him, and ask “when the Christ comes, will He do more miraculous signs than this man?” You can take that as a straight inquiry, which seems unlikely, but more likely this is a rhetorical question expressing something like; if the miracles that this man has done are not enough to convince you that He is the Christ, then what more would it take to convince you of that?

No, Jesus has not called Himself the Christ, but others have, and more importantly, the works that He does proclaim Him to be the Christ, as even the *hoi polloi* recognized. Those works are the kinds of things that Messiah would do when Messiah arrived, and because Jesus is doing those kinds of things, Messiah has arrived. We note the honor that the Son gives to the Father, confessing that it is “in the name of my Father” that He does those works. This observance of the fourth commandment is consistent in Jesus, from the twelve year old going to Nazareth and being obedient to His earthly parents, to the cross; obedience to the Heavenly Father.

A word study on “witness – μαρτυρεῖ ” quickly reveals that the LCMS has been using the word incorrectly for about fifty years, and counting. The word refers to one who has a) seen Jesus, and b) been martyred. Twenty-first century Americans fit neither criteria. If 1 John 5:7 is to be believed, then Absolution, Baptism, and the Sacrament, not Americans, today bear “witness” to the Christ. The faithful pastor points the flock to these things, where they will find the Christ, like John the Baptizer pointed to Him.

26. Returning now to the pastoral metaphor, Jesus speaks of the disbelief of those same works, emphatically telling “the Jews” “ἀλλὰ ὑμεῖς οὐ πιστεύετε – but you do not believe.” The verb is in the present tense, the current state of mind and soul of these people. Exactly what is it that they do not believe? They do not believe the works – miracles – that He does, and the reason why they don’t believe the works that Jesus does is because they don’t believe He is Messiah. The reason why Christians believe the miracles of Jesus is because we are Christians.

In all the Gospels, but nowhere more than in John’s work do we see the conflicted state of those who see the miracles of Jesus with their own very eyes. The entirety of the chapter previous to this was the narration of Jesus healing the man who had been born blind. Note how the Pharisees are unable, by simple observation, to deny these two things; the man had been blind from birth, and now he can see. Nor were they able to use simple logic to conclude that something was different about the man. Nor are they able to counter the claim of the man who had been in those two very different emphatically states that Jesus is the One who made it happen. But still...

The idea that believers believe in miracles because they are believers, while unbelievers don’t because they aren’t, is similar to the concept put forth by Jesus in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, right when He begins to tell parables, when He explains to His listeners that He speaks in parables so that the believers might better understand the Kingdom, but that – it seems extraordinary at first, but upon further review makes perfect sense – those same parables are told to hide the Kingdom from unbelievers. The rule is this; first believe in Jesus as the Christ, and then the rest of it; parables and miracles, for example, make sense.

At this point, the synergist would say that He tells them that they aren’t of his flock because they

don't believe, and would then add that all they have to do is decide to be born again and you will become a member of the flock. Grammatically speaking, the "ὅτι" clause allows for either meaning, but we know that God is not a synergist, and you know the whole "scripture interprets scripture" thingie. Go ahead and tell your people about "scripture interprets scripture." They would be interested to learn about it, like you were interested to learn it in seminary.

27. If you've been here for a while, then you've heard this before, and at any rate you may have figured it out for yourself. When we talk about the logistics of shepherding in first century Palestine, it's a lot like talking about the logistics of cattling in this new millennium; it depends a lot on time and place. Around here, cattle are relatively small herds, are fenced into relatively small spaces, and fed grain and stuff by one man, a tractor, and a wagon with an auger.

Further west, in places like Dodge City and Garden City, Kansas and Greeley, CO, cattle are confined in huge lots staffed by many workers and with much greater automation. In Marlboro Country, the high plains and mountains just east of and in the Rocky Mountains, cattle feed themselves on grass for much of the year, and maybe never see a fence or a man until roundup.

Those are just a few ways to raise cows, and there are other configurations, and variations on all of them. In looking at shepherding in first century Palestine, we note here that Jesus is here speaking of the configuration in which several flocks were, for various reasons, kept in one pen. It was not uncommon, for example, for all the village sheep to be brought in from pasture and put into one pen overnight for safe keeping. How were they then separated in the morning?

My dogs hear voices all the time, but the one to which they pay attention is mine. My children used to be like that, but as adults not so much, and that's the way that it should be. Back when we used to play together outside in the neighborhood, before video games and predators pulled and pushed children inside, it was customary for the mother to stand on the porch at appropriate times and yell for her youngsters to come home.

I can in my mind go up and down the street in the neighborhood and hear each of the distinctive yells, especially that annoying "Keith, Kent, Karrie" from three doors down. I can still hear them because I heard them almost every single day, sometimes multiple times, every single summer growing up. So it was that when I heard my mother's voice, I listened, and in my case, if I chose to ignore it, then I would hear my father's voice, and that generally meant trouble – for me, not for mom or dad.

We note here that Jesus emphatically calls us "my sheep – τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἐμὰ." We note here that, like dogs and children, we hear a lot of voices, especially if you listen to Christian radio, but we listen to the distinctive voice of our own shepherd, and this voice sounds a lot like the one you hear up front on Sunday morning. Go ahead. Say it. We note that He knows us and that we follow Him, and in that concept there is no synergism.

28. Of us, He says that "I give them eternal life – δίδωμι αὐτοῖς ζωὴν αἰώνιον." The verb is in the present tense; we are currently living a life that is eternal, and "eternal – αἰώνιον" means just that. As Plato and others have over the years noted by means of natural knowledge, the soul is eternal, and it will spend eternity either living or dying. Christians who are living eternally can

choose to die eternally, but that seems like a bad choice, doesn't it?

The sheep belong to the father, who gives them to the Son, and nobody will “be able to snatch them out of my hand – οὐχ ἄρπάσει τις αὐτὰ ἐκ τῆς χειρός μου.” “Be able” is the main verb, and “snatch away” is a present active infinitive verb that connotes sudden, often violent action. The word appears several times in Matthew and John, and almost always it's Satan doing the “snatching.” The same verb has just been used by Jesus in v. 12 in connection with the wolf taking the sheep (the hireling had fled.)

The picture – the shepherd holding the sheep in His hands – painted here by the words of Jesus is one that you have seen many times, and is maybe hanging in the building, in which case you should maybe reference it. If you do that, then every time the hearer passes by that picture, it will mean more to him than it does not. In preaching and teaching, use objects that are present and familiar, like Jesus does, not imported from home, to help people to better understand a concept.

At the top of the list of satanic priorities is the snatching away of Christians from the family and Kingdom of God to the family and kingdom of Satan. The present infinitive active indicates not only continuous action, but also that the snatching is very much part and parcel of Satan; who he is, his very being. If a shark is a killing and eating machine, so much more Satan. He likes snatching, he's good at it, and he is very passionate about it. If you say things like this from the pulpit, it may frighten people, so make sure to comfort them with the Gospel.

29. Again paying homage to His Father, and in words that bespeak His realization of the great responsibility that comes with being a shepherd – modern shepherds ought to take note – Jesus notes that the sheep belong to His Father, and that they have been given to Him. He further notes that His Father is the greatest, and for this reason nobody is able to snatch away the sheep from the hand of the Father, no more than Satan can snatch them out of His hand.

30. And now, about the time we might be asking in whose hand the sheep actually reside, the Father's or the Son's, Jesus explains that “I and the Father are one – “ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ἓν ἐσμεν. We have noted before Jesus' use of “I am” as recorded in John's Gospel. “I am,” of course, is the OT personal name of God (Jehovah, Yahweh, LORD), and the religious leaders were well aware of this. It's almost like Jesus is messing with them, “I am” the door, “I am” the Good Shepherd, etc. Finally, in 8:59 “before Abraham was, I am.”

At this point, the preacher might want to spend a little bit of time explaining the Person of Christ and The Trinity. On a base level, this means explaining that there is one God and three persons. You may or may not be surprised how many Lutherans are unfamiliar with the concept as well as the terminology. The idea of one God is pretty straightforward, and when talking about “persons,” I will first direct the hearer to forget everything they already know about the word “person” as we know it.

The word “person” is a word that the Church has been using since very early on, and it is a word that we use to identify the three – well, the three persons of the Trinity. Build on that base to talk about the two “natures” – another word that the Church uses to identify the two – you got it, the two natures of Christ. Help people to categorize, to understand what is and what is not, and

remind them that when push comes to shove, there are things about God that we will be able to well understand, and other things about God not so much.

Understand that under no circumstances should the sermon sound like a theology lecture, which is different from a sermon, and remember that they already know that you know more about this stuff than they do, so you don't have to impress them with big words, and that when you do that, they like it about as much as you like it when your doctor or mechanic does that to you. Oh, and have fun with it...

Law/Gospel

Outsider/Insider - Jesus is considered by the Pharisees to be the outsider to God's family and Kingdom. They consider themselves to be the insiders, the holders of the teachings and traditions of God's People. Jesus, of course, is not an outsider. He is actually the ultimate insider; "I and the Father are one." Jesus, the ultimate insider, is regarded as the ultimate outsider when He is forsaken by the Father. This was done so that those who follow Him, the Christians, would be regarded as insiders in God's family and Kingdom.

Our modern society frowns on such talk. It sounds like the Christians think they have a special relationship with a Special God or something and that somehow God regards us as special. As for the Christians, especially the spiritual and religious ones, they think that such talk would turn off the outsider to Christianity, the cardinal sin of our time. What we actually end up doing is using every gimmick we can think of to attract the visitor, and then we bend over backwards to get them to come back. The outsider ends up thinking that we really need him.

Not only do I think it's ok for Christians to think of themselves as special insiders, members of God's family and Kingdom, I think that they *should* think of themselves in this way. One way to create pathos (that's a good thing) in the listener is to make him think that he is part of the group. In this regard we can assure our Christian listeners that they are part of God's group and it will make them feel good. That's the kind of thing preachers ought to be doing to make people feel good in the right way. It's the truth, and it makes them feel good, and it makes the visitor want to be a part of the special group that we call "Christians."

Alone/Cared For - The lone sheep does not do very well. The sheep owned by a good shepherd receives outstanding care. One of the main differences between shepherding and ranching is that sheep were used in New Testament times primarily for milk and wool, meaning that you didn't normally kill them. Cattle are raised almost exclusively to be killed and eaten. (Our farmer neighbors, my wife's aunts, still run a few cows, and they will often name them. A couple of years ago they had a cow that they named "Timmy." At least until it was time for Timmy to go to the butcher, at which time he became "cow." I just call him "freezer full of tasty meat.") The Christian does not go through life alone. She is part of the flock, and through the Pastor and the Church, by means of Word and Sacrament, is nurtured, protected, and cared for.

Guilt/Innocence - Jesus talks to the Pharisees about their guilt, always a risky business. Just try going down to the mall and calling people "sinners...guilty" and see what that gets you. It's even

worse when you have say it to your flock from the pulpit, but that is our task. Most Lutherans come to church understanding that they are “poor, miserable sinners,” but not all. Given the loose morality of our time, we need to remind people of exactly what is sin and the guilt that comes with sin and the punishment that comes with the guilt. We also especially need to preach the Law against Phariseeism, which will always be a part of the LCMS mix. Then the Gospel.

Death/Life - The sheep who belong to The Good Shepherd will never die (v. 28)

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