

WHAT KIND OF LEADERSHIP?

Based on a Sermon by Paul Neuchterlein
Adapted by the Rev. Daniel W. Hinkle, Interim Rector
4th Sunday of Easter: Year A May 3, 2020

Scripture: John 10:1-10

"10 Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers. 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Sermon: You have been in this interim period without a settled Rector for almost a year now. Your Profile Committee will soon complete the Parish Profile and Portfolio. Your Search Committee has been formed and is ready to receive resumes and begin the interview process. All this is in preparation to call your new settled Rector. I want to assure you that you are right on schedule with your search, and probably a little ahead of schedule. So, no worries.

The world we now live in can be frightening and chaotic, what with the threat of Corona Virus and everything else. So, on this Good Shepherd Sunday, I want to explore what kind of leadership we need for these troubled times? What kind of leader will your new settled Rector be?

The founder of Sojourner's Community in Washington, DC, Jim Wallis, wrote an excellent book a few years ago called "God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It." It's a somewhat moderating book politically. It has some more socially conservative views on things like abortion, while also lifting up what Wallis calls a "prophetic politics," a politics rooted in the Hebrew prophets of the Bible. The Poor Peoples Campaign grew out of this tradition. This is a politics of compassion for the poor and of the nonviolent ways of Jesus in

standing against evil. He dares to really ask the questions about leadership with the Good Shepherd in mind.

It's an important time to ask, what kind of leadership? That is the question posed by our scripture texts today. The image of Shepherd had long been a central image for leadership among Jesus' people. But there is also the context of our Gospel for today that is rarely mentioned or sufficiently recognized. A text without a context is a pretext and a lie. As Jesus begins the theme of the Good Shepherd in chapter ten, verse one, there's no break from chapter nine, no change of scene noted. (We need to remember that chapters and verses were not added until centuries after the scriptures were composed.)

John chapter 9 is the story about Jesus healing a man born blind from birth. But it's much more than that. The actual healing story is done by verse five. What follows in the next 36 verses, especially given our theme of leadership, is a controversy with and among the leaders of Jesus' day. Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath, and they refuse to accept the healing as a sign of greatness because Jesus broke the technicalities of the Law. They conclude their internal controversy by expelling the healed man, throwing him out. The man who had been born blind, however, shows himself to have truly come to see by going straight to Jesus to worship him.

After healing the man born blind, Jesus finds himself in a controversy with the leaders of his people, so, he follows with these words about leadership, about what it means to be a Good Shepherd. The same bad leaders will respond to Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead in chapter 11 by plotting to kill Jesus. High priest Caiaphas is 'prophetic' in expressing the usual tactic of human leaders: "*...it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed*" (John 11:50). In other words, our human leaders sacrifice other people.

We hear this attitude in our leaders today. "Oh, Sure. A few thousand people will probably die, but we've got to reopen our economy." They bring us together as a people by attempting to galvanize us against someone else: the Mexicans, the Muslims, women, gays, lesbians, the poor, the liberal Democrats, the conservative Republicans, a few thousand people dead from COVID 19. If they can't find a scapegoat, there's a good chance they'll become the scapegoat themselves. How often do we do that to our leaders? Someone must pay.

The sad fact is that 60,000+ Americans have succumbed to the Corona Virus in less than two months. This is a higher death rate than the number of American soldiers who died during the fifteen years we were involved in the Vietnam War. Think about that for a minute before you say this disease is not that bad. (Pause)

But Jesus is a totally different kind of leader. He breaks the mold and makes a new one. Here in John's Gospel, he's not only the Good Shepherd, but first and foremost the Lamb of God. Remember, John the Baptists speaks the first words

about Jesus: *Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29).

We can see this dynamic of the Good Shepherd who's also the Lamb in today's reading. Listen to these couple of verses: *"The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."* (John 10:2-4).

There's only one scenario where there's a gatekeeper: when one brings the livestock to the stock yard. There, the shepherd leads the sheep to the gate and leaves them to be slaughtered. It was similar in Jesus 'day. There was a special gate in Jerusalem called the Sheep Gate, where one might find a gatekeeper. The shepherd would lead his flock to the Sheep Gate at Passover time for the ritual slaughter of blood sacrifice on the Temple altar. The evangelist John is especially precise about his timing of Jesus 'Passion to be sure that we know that Jesus became the Lamb of God who proceeded his flock to the Temple slaughter. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who doesn't just lead his flock into the Sheep Gate? He also goes before them to the slaughter. As the Lamb of God, he's able to promise them abundant life from the God who gives it abundantly, even when he suffers abuse and death. His sheep will follow.

Have we ever seen this kind of leadership in action besides Jesus himself? Jim Wallis in his book "God's Politics" keeps going back to Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement, as an example of bringing faith together with justice and politics. We can also point to Dr. King as an example of a sheep who followed the Good Shepherd in the way of suffering the abuse instead of dishing it out.

In fact, we can turn things around again. If Jesus is the Good Shepherd who becomes the Lamb of God, disciples like Dr. King are Lambs of God following Jesus who become Good Shepherds in this world for others. Dr. King was a Good Shepherd who was out ahead of the flock in those civil rights marches. He led the way in suffering the abuse of police dogs and police batons and imprisonment. But the truly remarkable part of his shepherding was that so many others followed! The civil rights movement was precisely that, a movement, a whole flock of sheep who became Good Shepherds in this world, leading us into greater rights for all. I believe this is a model of brave, pastoral leadership needed by the church today. It's something to consider when you call a new Rector.

I stumbled across another example of this paradoxical turnaround of Good Shepherds who become Lambs of God, and Lambs of God who become Good Shepherds. I like baseball. April 15th has been declared Jackie Robinson Day. In 1947 he became the first man of color to play in Major League Baseball. He had to be a brave man to do that. As a predecessor of the civil rights movement, there is a

sense in which Dr. King was following in his footsteps. Listen to this remarkable testimony from baseball great Hank Aaron of what Jackie Robinson's brand of leadership meant to him.

"Jackie Robinson meant everything to me. Before I was a teenager, I was telling my father that I was going to be a ballplayer, and he was telling me, 'Ain't no colored ballplayers.' Then Jackie broke into the Brooklyn Dodgers lineup in 1947, and Daddy never said that again.... Jackie not only showed me and my generation what we could do, he also showed us how to do it. By watching him, we knew that we would have to swallow an awful lot of pride to make it in the big leagues. We knew the hatred and cruelty Jackie had to endure quietly from the fans, the press, and the anti-integrationist teams such as the Cardinals and the Phillies, and even from his teammates. We also knew that he didn't subject himself to all that for personal benefit. Why would he choose to get spiked and cursed at and spat on for his own account? Jackie was a college football hero, a handsome, intelligent, talented guy with a lot going for him. He didn't need that kind of humiliation. And it certainly wasn't in his nature to suffer it silently. But he had to, not for himself, but for me and all the young black kids like me. When Jackie Robinson loosened his fist and turned the other cheek, he was taking the blows for the love and future of his people." (Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, April 17, 1997)

Jesus the Good Shepherd comes to be with us again today to tend to us and lead us out. He feeds us at his table as we remember him once again as the Good Shepherd who became the Lamb of God for us. He forgives us and nourishes us with God's love. And then he also calls us by name, leading us out as Lambs of God who ourselves become Good Shepherds for this world so much in need of a new way of leadership. Dr. King. Jackie Robinson. And Jesus. Excellent models of leadership for your new settled Rector.

Amen?!

Sources:

NRSV Bible

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