

North Kildonan United Church

25th April 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“Jesus the Good Shepherd”

Acts 4: 5-12

I John 3: 16-24

John 10: 11-18

Grant, O God, that in the written word and through the spoken word, we may behold the living Word, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus said: *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me."* (John 10: 11, 14).

The fourth Sunday of Easter is often referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday, with the gospel reading coming from some part of the 10th chapter of John, either verses 1-10, or 11-18, or 22-30. If we were able to sing, we would certainly include *The Lord's My Shepherd* in our service, and if, all those years ago, Leo Mol had been given a different commission by the people of St Jude's Anglican Church when they desired a memorial stained glass window, we might have an image of a lamb wrapped around the shoulders of the Good Shepherd gracing our sanctuary. Of course we are grateful to the people of St Patrick's and St Jude's Anglican Church for their gift, in 1982, of this "Victory through Jesus Christ" window, a window made surplus when the St Jude's building was torn down. Leo Mol windows are always precious possessions for any church building and we are certainly blessed to have this one in our midst.

Jesus the Good Shepherd is a powerful and reassuring image for Christian folk. It offers us a sense of comfort and of being cared for, of security and safety, of being a part of the family of God, though I guess the more accurate term, if we are talking sheep, is being a part of the flock.

Another hymn we would have sung this day is *The King of Love My Shepherd Is*, with its evocative verse: *"Perverse and foolish oft I strayed; but yet in love he sought me, and on his shoulder gently laid, and home rejoicing brought me."* A wonderful paraphrase of Psalm 23 by Henry William Baker.

During my years at Silver Heights, we would create our own bulletin covers with the help of Google Art. We would sort through the various depictions in paintings, stained glass, icons, etc. of whatever subject we were looking for. We knew we wanted a lamb safe in the arms of Jesus which you might think would be a fairly simple image to find. We finally settled on a picture of a rather contented little lamb, secure in the arms of the loving shepherd. That was after rejecting several other images because in each case the expression on the lamb's face seemed actually rather arrogant-if sheep can in fact be arrogant.

In today's gospel, Jesus declares himself to be the good shepherd who is prepared to do everything for the sake of the flock, even to the point of losing his own life in the process. Jesus contrasts himself with the faithless hired hand who runs away at the first sign of danger, running away and allowing great harm to come to the sheep.

In John's gospel Jesus is quite clear that he is the shepherd of his fold and that those whom he calls to his flock, those who hear his voice, those who follow his teachings, will be kept safe through his divine power and grace.

So we might ask the question. For the writer of John's gospel, who are the others, who are those who are not a part of the flock, those who are the faithless hired hands who really don't care for the people? Who is John referring to?

We find the answer in the text that follows today's gospel. *"Again the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' Others were saying, 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'"* (John 10: 19-21)

Throughout John's gospel we find the phrase "The Jews" used often. In the Easter story, read just a few weeks ago, we heard the following: "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said *"Peace be with you"*.

In the 12th chapter of John, we find this passage: *"When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus."*

The Jews. It was convenient shorthand to lump together in one phrase any and all opposition to Jesus with just two words, the Jews. Soon after that, once the Christian church became dominant and powerful, the Jews became ready scapegoats for society's problems. Century by century they were mistreated, deprived of rights and property, denied freedom of religion and a safe place in society. Major theologians like Martin Luther railed against them and we all know too well how the Jews fared during the Holocaust.

A saying that once made the rounds was: *"How odd of God to choose the Jews."* Later someone much wiser replied: *"But not so odd as those who choose a Jewish God but spurn the Jews."*

Anti-Semitism didn't begin with John's gospel, but like many other passages of scripture manipulated for wrong purposes, the seemingly negative connotations of the Jews in this gospel have contributed to a distorted view of the Jews, rendering them as enemies to Christians, when that might not have been at all in the mind of the gospel writer.

Biblical scholarship sees John's use of the Jews as having a variety of meanings. The term can refer to specific opponents of Jesus, or of the entire people of the Jews. It needs to be understood in the context of the times. By the late 1st century, before this gospel was written, the Jewish authorities had expelled from the synagogues Jews who believed in Jesus. This caused great offence and probably negatively influenced the gospel writer.

But it's also possible that John's use of the term "the Jews" was more descriptive than derogatory.

At the heart of the issue is the question of who Jesus really is. People of his day, Jewish people but also others, were looking for a Messiah, a Saviour, a rescuer who would end Roman oppression, care for the widow and the orphan, and bring in a new age of peace and harmony. The Messiah might be a great military leader who could mobilize the armies of the righteous in a mighty cataclysmic battle against the powers of darkness. Others held that the Messiah was the Prince of Peace, who would usher in an age where there would be no war, no foreign occupation, no oppression. They saw the Messiah bringing in a time when, as Isaiah writes: *"They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."*

If we continued on in today's gospel we would hear the question put to Jesus: *"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."* Jesus does not describe himself that way. His mission and ministry are broader than the traditional understandings of Messiah. His work is to bring all believers together into the family and household of God—a global rather than local approach.

St Paul understood it this way. The covenant God made with the Jewish people is eternal. Judaism is the trunk of the tree of faith to which, through Christ, Gentiles such as ourselves are grafted onto. We are honorary Jews, if you will. Without Judaism, without the Jews, Christianity would not have come to life.

In the time of Jesus, some believed in him and some did not. Some trusted in the accounts of the resurrection and some called such things impossible. Some caught a fresh, life-giving vision of what a Saviour might look like, yet others could not see any change in their society or their personal life by this person who was being called a Messiah. They just weren't convinced by him. And what held in the time of Jesus holds to this day.

So some followed Jesus, and others perhaps thought about the points he made but felt he wasn't for them. Such is the nature of faith and belief. What makes sense for one person doesn't necessarily hold for another. That is as true today as it was when Jesus walked the earth.

Throughout human existence, the search goes on for meaning and purpose. How did we get here, how was the world created, is there a power beyond what we can see and is that power based on love? The Hebrew Scriptures, so often misunderstood by Christians, speak of a loving Father, slow to anger and quick to forgive. They are the

base upon which Christianity is built, our foundation in knowing and loving God. When Jesus preached, his teachings were in line with Hebrew thought and practice.

The diversity of God's wonderful creation suggests to me that God delights in all forms of worship sincerely offered, and in all acts of compassion and caring given to those in need. It is folly to think that there is only one true faith, one genuine religion, and that everything else is false. Love God and love your neighbour as yourself is common to both Judaism and Christianity, and who are we to declare that those who don't think or act or sing or pray like us are not equally loved and cherished by God. Yes, Jesus said *"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life"* but that should not be understood or used as a way of excluding or denigrating or denying the truth of other beliefs. For me, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, but that is what he means to me, and who am I to disregard another person's religious quest which may be based on a completely different understanding of God.

For us, Jesus is our Good Shepherd, the one who loves us, who gently lays us on his shoulder and brings us home. But surely our belief that God was in Christ does not in any way need to be in tension with, or opposition to, the beliefs of others who do not claim Christ as their own. God is revealed to those who seek the divine in different, yet equally enriching and soul satisfying ways, and who are we to say otherwise.

I want to end by telling you the story of Pearl and Joe, who were members of my congregation of Forest Hill United Church in Toronto. They were a Christian/Jewish couple, happily married for many years. Joe, who was Jewish, was an active and much loved member of our church, at worship each Sunday. He contributed to the life of the congregation in many ways, including doing magic tricks for the children at Christmas parties. Occasionally he was even known to appear as Santa Claus. Pearl, a Swedish farm girl from Saskatchewan, was also very active in the church and also much loved. She was a devoted member of the United Church Women and served on the church board, amongst her other church involvements. On Jewish holidays she would make traditional Jewish food for Joe. They didn't keep Kosher, but she tried as much as possible to honour Joe's heritage.

Their marriage was an example of mutual respect, devotion and love, as well as a vibrant symbol of interfaith living that enriched both of them, their family and the community around them. They were truly a blessing to all of us at Forest Hill United.

"Love God and love and forgive one another", the rabbis of old taught. Words certainly worth building a life upon.

Amen.