

Easter 4C
Peace, Seattle
May 12, 2019
John 10:22-30

THE VOICE OF THE SHEPHERD

In a story about his experiences living with a Navaho family in the 1950's, Bill Itel tells about how Albert Begay, the old Navaho sheep herder who adopts him, relates to the outside world, the world beyond the wide open country of his people, the white, urban world, which to him seems strange and even nonsensical.

When Bill brings home a picture of the then newly completed Empire State Building, the old shepherd asks one question: HOW MANY SHEEP DOES IT HOLD?

At first Bill doesn't understand the question. SURELY, thinks Bill, HE CAN SEE ALL THE LITTLE PEOPLE SURROUNDING THE BUILDING. HE CAN SEE HOW SMALL THEY ARE AND HOW THE BUILDING DWARFS THEM. SURELY HE KNOWS THAT SHEEP HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING.

But eventually, Bill catches on to what Albert is really asking. Albert wants to know how to understand these strange things he is being shown. He wants to know how they relate to his everyday world, the world of open country, of mesas, the world of sheep.

HOW MANY SHEEP DOES IT HOLD? means: CAN I FIND A PLACE WITHIN MY WORLD FOR THIS BUILDING? IS THERE A WAY TO FIT IT INTO MY LIFE CONTEXT, MY REALITY?

Our psalm today, sung by the choir in a lovely setting, is the Shepherd's psalm—Psalm 23—a favorite for generations—why? Part of the reason, I think, is that David so ably invites us into a world he knows, a world of sheep, shepherds and hazards; and helps us to see that the God he has come to know is not distant or aloof but close and intimate and caring.

Today in our Gospel Jesus picks up on that metaphor, casting himself in the role of shepherd. MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE. I KNOW THEM, AND THEY FOLLOW ME. AND NO ONE WILL SNATCH THEM OUT OF MY HAND.

The context in which Jesus makes this claim is worth looking into.

Chapter 10 of John marks one of the last occasions when Jesus preaches publicly. The context is The Feast of the Dedication, the festival commemorating the rededication of the temple in 164 BCE after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes.¹

Antiochus Epiphanes—whose very name means “*god manifest*,”—reigned over the Seleucid Empire for eleven years. After his troops seized control of Jerusalem, he became infamous for arrogantly entering the Temple sanctuary and carrying off the golden altar, the lampstand, and all its utensils and vessels associated with it.²

He then erected an altar to the god Zeus on the site of the Temple altar and this act became known as the “*desolating sacrilege*.”

¹ See 1 Maccabees 4:52-59

² 1 Maccabees 1:20-24

When Judean patriots succeeded in their armed rebellion against the Seleucid regime, and regained control of Jerusalem, Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers cleansed the Temple sanctuary and rededicated it three years to the day after it was profaned by Antiochus Epiphanes.³

(It's in this event that the festival of Hanukkah has its origins.)

So... when John tells us that Jesus is on the Temple grounds during the Feast of Dedication, we need to be aware of all the overlapping elements that are swirling about:

- Bad memories of Antiochus claiming kinship to god and commanding veneration for himself;
- Nationalist pride at in remembering the defeat of foreign occupiers;
- Good memories of Jewish leaders who led a rebellion to vanquish their enemies;
- And a renewed zeal for reclaiming the religious identity that a gentile King had sought to destroy.

As one scholar points out, Jesus is making statements like "I AND THE FATHER ARE ONE" at a time when the blasphemous pretensions of Antiochus IV are particularly fresh in the minds of Jewish people.⁴

During this feast, then, while Jesus makes his rounds through the Temple courts, he's confronted by the increasingly hostile Temple authorities. HOW LONG WITH YOU KEEP US IN SUSPENSE, they say. IF YOU ARE THE MESSIAH, TELL US PLAINLY.

Given the context, the growing resistance to Jesus' claims of oneness with God is understandable. His response seems to indicate that Jesus' own position has hardened, I HAVE TOLD YOU AND YOU DO NOT BELIEVE ME BECAUSE YOU DO NOT BELONG TO MY SHEEP.

Yet, at the same time, Jesus' description of himself as the Good Shepherd willing to lay down his life for his sheep, evokes positive memories both of David, the Shepherd/King, and of Judas Maccabaeus and other martyrs who gave their lives for the Temple and the God whom it represents.

John's story of Jesus is complicated further still by the fact that he wrote his gospel toward the end of the 1st Century when the split between Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and Jews who do not believe he was the Messiah was growing. Today's reading picks up on that tension.

What's the upshot? The upshot is that we have to be careful what we take away when we're reading in John's gospel. Because the history of interpretation has shown that simplified, black and white interpretations of these complex texts has often fueled the fire of virulent anti-semitism through the centuries.

On Thursday I was at Temple de Hirsch Sinai for the Clergy Institute, an annual gathering that brings Jewish and Christian leaders together to address contemporary topics of common interest. This year the theme was the rise of anti-semitism, and the guest speaker was Professor Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University.

Dr. Lipstadt was made famous in recent years when she was sued for libel by British historian David Irving, because she'd labeled him as a dangerous holocaust denier and perverter of truth. The case went to trial in London, and Dr. Lipstadt's legal defense prevailed, but the truth is antisemitism in our social media age is on the rise.⁵

³ 1 Maccabees 4:36-51

⁴ James VanderKam, quoted by Barbara Rossing in *New Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) p.37

⁵ Book and film based on trial.

And when we witness antisemitism in any form—from off the cuff comments at social gatherings to violent attacks on Jewish synagogues—we Christians need to stand up, take notice, and publically disavow those attitudes and actions that undergird religious bigotry.

Alright. So, having wrestled a bit with the complexities of context, lets focus now on the true promise of this text. John 10:27-28:

MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE. I KNOW THEM, AND THEY FOLLOW ME. I GIVE THEM ETERNAL LIFE, AND THEY WILL NEVER PERISH. NO ONE WILL SNATCH THEM OUT OF MY HAND.

There's a story of a Montana sheep rancher who'd herded sheep for years using dogs and horses, and even helicopters on occasion. But he'd always been intrigued by the ancient methods used by the shepherds of Israel.

In Israel, he'd learned, sheep aren't driven from behind—they're led from the front. (Bulletin cover...) The voice of the shepherd becomes imprinted upon the sheep from birth. In fact, the connection becomes so strong that even when the sheep from various flocks cross paths, the sheep don't become confused. They simply follow their shepherd's voice.

Well one day this Montana sheep rancher had an opportunity to visit the Holy Land and see this unfold in the flesh. While he was traveling through one of the villages near Galilee, he finally saw a herd of sheep. But much to his disappointment, instead of being led from the front, these sheep were being driven from behind.

Confused and disappointed he turned to the tour guide and said:

“All my life I've heard about how the sheep here follow the shepherd and are led from the front, but that shepherd (he pointed out) is driving them from the back.”

The guide answered him:

“My friend, today is market day. The man you see driving those sheep is not the shepherd, he's the butcher.”

There are many perils that characterize life as we know it today. Everywhere we look, it seems, hazards lurk. And with so many pretenders calling out to us to follow them, to embrace their agenda, to allow ourselves to be shaped by their values (or lack thereof), it's easy to become confused and to find ourselves being driven toward uncertain ends.

But the point of Jesus' teaching today, the grace and good news, is that when we tune in to his voice, when we put our trust in him first and foremost, then we'll be able to discern most clearly where and how we ought to follow.

This discerning and following isn't something we do alone. We do it together, as community.

The thief, the pretender, the butcher, says Jesus, come only to steal and kill and destroy, but I came that you might have life and have it abundantly!

To know the voice of the Good Shepherd is to follow the voice of the good shepherd to abundant life.

Let us pray...

Good Shepherd, your love and care for us is astounding. To you, none of us is expendable; to you each one of us is precious. Enable us to distinguish your voice ever more clearly from the voices of

the world's pretenders, to stand up to hatred and bigotry in every form, and to invite others into the abundant life you promise. Amen.