

DECEMBER 20, 2020

Marion

weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”



Continuing our Advent series, this week we turn our attention to the shepherds in the nativity story. I want to remind us of something we addressed last week. There are details often incorporated into the way we tell the story that are not necessarily in scripture itself. They are part of our tradition, and in this story in particular the traditions draw us into the warmth of the season in important ways.

The key is that when we fill in blanks in the story for the purpose of expressing it in drama, song, or story, we make sure we stay faithful to what IS in scripture and the meaning of the event.

Here's an instance with the shepherds. We believe that the shepherds were Jewish. Scripture doesn't designate their faith at all. The inference holds water, however, because of the nature of how the news was revealed to them. They would have had to be Jews because a Gentile wouldn't have any reference point for the message. Messiah, Savior, City of David were part of the Jewish tradition, and would have held meaning for these shepherds as such. Their identity makes logical sense.

I would also suggest that the shepherds hold the distinction of the first to bear witness to Jesus' birth. We know the magi arrived later, and there is no sense that anyone had arrived before them. They heard the message, obediently took the direction to visit, and then went out proclaiming what they had found.

I wonder at the response of those that heard their story. Scripture says those who heard it were "amazed". What did that reaction look like? Were some excited? Were some in disbelief? There is no real sense that the news turned into anything actionable on the part of those who heard it. You'd think that Mary and Joseph would be swamped with visitors wanting to see this Messiah. Perhaps even folks who would want to help ensure His safe upbringing so He could fulfill His destiny. I wonder if some thirty years later as Jesus' ministry unfolded if any of the shepherds or those they shared their message with were brought back to this night. We don't know, but it doesn't hurt to wonder as sometimes we ourselves are in the place of delivering a message to unsuspecting people, and others we are the recipients. How do we respond? What do we do with that information? I would also suggest that in this moment, the shepherds became the sheep.

In our modern vocabulary, "sheep" has become defined as a person who believes something offered by another without thought, acts on it, and even parrots it around to others. This is precisely what the shepherds did. They were given a message, believed it wholly, acted on it, and then spread the message around.

What is really wild and mind numbing is to consider the origin of the message. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. We also believe Him to be divine, eternal. Angels act at the direction of God, who is Jesus. So the Good Shepherd ordered the angels to tell shepherds to go visit the birth of the Good Shepherd. In following this direction, they followed God's voice.

This leads us to an interesting and somewhat silly reality among people, including Christians. The use of the word "sheep" as an insult. First of all, it should be considered odd for Christians to be insulting to begin with. But to use this term is especially odd. We're going to look at this both logically and theologically.

If I call you a sheep, it's typically because I feel you hold a belief or opinion that I disagree with. That you hold that belief or opinion without having given honest thought to it and are simply buying into what someone else is saying. And that you are lumped in with a much larger group of people that agree with you and follow that same voice. Often the label of sheep is located around one or two stances you hold, and it is highly unlikely I've taken the time to actually talk to you and hear what your process for coming to your conclusion truly was.

Here's the problem. I, too, am part of a larger group that disagrees with you. It is very unlikely that I am the lead voice in that group, which means I and those with whom I agree are also following a voice. In fact, for me to call you a sheep in reality reveals that I am a sheep as well. If sheep is an insult, I'm also insulting myself. Which is ridiculous.

The reality, like it or not, is that to some degree all of us are sheep. The question is, who do we allow to be our shepherd?

Considering it Biblically, it's even sillier, because "sheep" is actually the metaphor for Christians. We use the imagery often. We talk about the Lamb of God. We use the term "flock" for a congregation. In truth, being a sheep conveys that we are valuable in God's sight. We are loved, watched over. We are so valuable that we know the Shepherd will lay down His life for the sheep. This is powerfully demonstrated on the cross. We know that the Shepherd will trust the flock to stay put if even one strays away. That single sheep is worth going after and bringing back to the flock.

Think about the value of a sheep in the culture of the day in which the nativity story unfolds. When I was in elementary school, we were told that there are three basic needs. Food, water, and shelter. A sheep covered two of the three. It's an animal, so it's made of meat which of course is food. It also produces wool, which is used for fabric and the like to make clothes, blankets, tents, all of which protect from the elements. They are incredibly valuable.

We too have innate worth in God's eyes. Enough so that God chose to enter this flesh and blood creation for the purpose of teaching, loving, and redeeming us. To be one of God's sheep is a wonderful distinction.

John's gospel tells us about our relationship to the Good Shepherd. Part of how we know we truly belong to Him is that we follow His voice. We know what His voice sounds like, and will not follow another. His voice is truth, it is a guiding force, it is reliable. We can measure whether or not we are hearing His voice using the standard of scripture. Does what we hear line up with His witness? His works? His words? If not, we re-consider just how much credence we give to the one who is seeking to convince us, persuade us, guide, lead, or recruit us.

In fact, we are told that any other voice that doesn't line up with Jesus belongs to a robber and a thief. To someone who leads to destruction. This person is considered a hireling. They have no honest concern for the sheep. They are concerned for themselves. When it gets hard or danger comes, they cut and run rather than protecting. They guide the flock where it is convenient for themselves, which ultimately is away from Jesus.

Our question then, whenever a voice is in our ear, is whose voice is it? Who is our shepherd? The Good Shepherd or the hireling? This matters. It matters ultimately because John uses the image of being led through the correct gate. Jesus leads us Home. He leads us through the gate to the Kingdom.

It matters because when we choose to fall in with someone and not only buy in to their message but repeat it, if we call ourselves Christian we are conveying that the message is in keeping with our faith. If it isn't, we are persuading others to an attitude or belief that is counter to Jesus. We are deceiving them that something that is not aligned with Christ is in fact Christian. We may be leading them away from the gate to the Kingdom.

Especially during this time of year, we, the sheep of Christ, must tune our ears to the voice of the Good Shepherd. We tune out those other competing voices that seek to disrupt the hope, peace, joy, and love of this season.

We are certainly in difficult and frustrating times. This Advent is like none other in our lifetimes. Day after day I read or hear stories about how hard working people. Postal employees. Cashiers. Doctors, nurses, police officers, and so many more are berated and insulted simply for doing their job and striving to do it as well as they can. People are tense and stretched and don't always handle that condition well.

None of us are immune from the circumstances around us.

But we do have the voice of the Good Shepherd. He reminds us that all of those things that stoke the ugly in us are in fact lies. The truth lies in the spirit of Advent. The truth lies in hope, peace, joy, and love. It lies in the correctness of finding a deeper well of patience with one another especially in trying times. It lies in the intention of bringing brightness into the lives of others in whatever way we can.

If we find ourselves being pushed by a voice that takes us away from God, away from truth, like a bad radio station tune in to another channel. Keep looking until we find that still voice that reminds us that we are loved with all of our good and all of our faults. Let that love prompt the love in us to be offered to the world so that they can see what the love of God looks like in real time and real practice.

Like the shepherds, follow the Shepherd. Make the season warm and bright.

BIBLE STUDY John 10

Continuing our study of John, Chapter 10 keeps giving us insight, and for me appreciation, of how John is communicating the events of Jesus' life. We see that this is clearly a continuation of chapter 9. Jesus is addressing those who were critical of His healing work. In doing so, He reveals Himself as the Messiah, the Redeemer, yet they still don't grasp His message. Not unlike His message earlier that divided a crowd at the Festival of Tabernacles, once again, the crowd is divided as to what His words mean. Some judge Him based on their presumptions and doubt, The others seem to judge Him on His actions letting those speak for themselves.

Regarding the message of the Good Shepherd, I direct you to the sermon from last Sunday, December 13. We fleshed out this metaphor a good bit. What I will remind us of is that the metaphor attaches itself clearly to discussion immediately held in earlier chapters. Jesus ticked off people by telling them that if they don't grasp the truth of who He is, they are children of the devil as they are believing in and propagating lies, and the devil is the father of lies. Here He does something similar. He accuses them of following the hireling, the thief, robber, destructor, if they don't follow His voice. This is clearly angering to the listening crowd as it calls into question whether or not they truly have faith in God.

What comes next is another opportunity to remind us about time. It goes from one feast to another. Nothing in between. These feasts are about three months apart from one another. This means much could have transpired between them, and we have no sense of what this is in John's gospel. Driving the story forward, John keeps His narrative moving by addressing what is significant to his sense of Jesus' purpose. He keeps ramping up the conflict between Jesus and His own religious leaders.

As Jesus engages people at this festival, we see another altercation. They have somehow hung on to His allusions that He is the Messiah, and push Him to speak it clearly. Jesus reminds them that He's answered this question many times already, and they simply can't grasp His message. This, once again, is instructive for us today.

There are people around us who will not, or perhaps can not, grasp our message about Jesus. For some they can't grasp the message of sacrificial love that we are called to follow and fulfill in our lives. That calling is a bridge too far and so they reject it in favor of something more self serving. Unfortunately there are versions of the gospel that try to have it both ways and uplift selfish gain as a sign of faith. For me I would call these versions false gospels.

For others, there exist many other reasons. They may embrace the message of love, mercy, and that God desires to redeem all of us, however whether for psychological or cultural reasons may not be able to grasp the religious or faith vocabulary we place around it. The ideal is there in regards to practice and heartfelt compassion, what is different is the vocabulary used to describe the reason for these attributes.

Either way, ultimately, we leave judgement to God. But we must judge where to place our time and energy. If we encounter those who can't grasp/embrace/engage the specifics of our message, how long and far do we pursue them?

Jesus, it seems, was frustrated with them. He wanted them to "get it". He loved them. Yet they refused. He pointed out their refusal and ignorance. What is interesting is that it doesn't seem like He began their encounters in a hostile way. So often these kinds of passage begin with Scribes and Pharisees challenging Jesus, not the other way around. What does this help us grasp?

In the process of striving to live a Christian life, and work with those who may be ready to grab onto the gospel message, the ones most adamant against that message may well seek us out. The message of love, mercy, and peace is threatening to those whose power, wealth, and authority

depend on indifference, bitterness, and angst. We aren't called to pick fights, but fights may come. Here Jesus defends His position with brilliance and escapes because as we've so often seen in John's gospel, "His time had not yet come." We must be very aware that not only are we not Jesus, but we may not be fully aware when our time arrives. The question in that moment is "are we prepared?"

Are we prepared to live our faith and engage those who may want and need to hear the gospel despite those around us that may look down on our faith? Are we prepared to take the confrontations with the conversions? Can we handle ourselves with grace and tact? In Jesus' case, every crowd was a mix of those genuinely seeking Him, those seeking a miracle and nothing more, and those seeking to kill Him. In pursuing the seeker, inevitably the user and the enemy are also involved.

Jesus then speaks again succinctly and clearly about His union with God, His mission, and His authority. And of course they seek to stone Him as a result. Jesus asks if they seek to stone Him for His works and they reply that it's for His claims. They have failed to recognize the His works are the product of His claims. His claims being seen more clearly now as being divine.

Once again looking to defend Himself and confuse the others, He quotes Psalms and speaks of men being called "gods". This may seem confusing. Essentially what Jesus is speaking about is authority. Those who are in positions of authority, to varying degrees, hold godlike power. They hold the power of condemnation or deliverance. They hold the power of success or failure. They hold the power of life and death in some cases. Depending on the level of authority one holds, it can seem like on this worldly plane that they hold the power of a god.

So if sinful man holds this authority, how much more authority does the legitimate Son of God hold? He cites His works as evidence of His origin. His origin is evidence of His authority and identity.

Once again, this holds great consideration for us. If we are given authority or status, how do we use it? Do we do so in a way that conveys the love and grace of God? Do we use it in a way that demonstrates the selfishness and worldliness of humanity? People are watching. If we call ourselves Christian, does our use of authority show Jesus or something else? Jesus cites His works as the evidence. I argue that particularly today, people look more at our actions than our words. The actions we take speak far louder to our faith than what we speak. Do our actions communicate genuinely the love of God?

The other side of this is how we discern whom to cast our own lot with. Each of us have to make choices about what and whom we follow. This goes directly back to the Good Shepherd. "The sheep know my voice." What do we allow to persuade us in the voice of another. Is it convenience? Personal gain? Comfort? Validation? Affirmation? Or is it the standard of Jesus? Do we look at actions matched up against words? Policy and practice matched up against frilly mission or vision statements?

This matters as our voice lends credibility for or against Christ. Our lives exhibit a model that represents Christ, or, as the Bible calls it, antichrist. Jesus is getting at this here. These self-professed Godly people are witnessing deeds done only through the power of God, and truth that is only evident and clear through the voice of God, yet turning a blind eye to it. Jesus is pleading with them to, even if His words won't convince them, at least let His works convince them. Missouri is the "show me state", long ago Jesus showed them. Yet they still wouldn't believe.

In fact, they got angry. As we've seen so often before, when personal beliefs and values are challenged. When folks get backed into a corner, they fight. In this case they went to stone Jesus for blasphemy. His hour had not yet come, and so He escaped.

When Jesus escapes He went to where John was baptizing. The people there would likely have been familiar with John's message and ministry. They weren't the Pharisees. They weren't the Scribes. They weren't the educated. They were instead the ones privileged to have the voice of an honest prophet, and clear sighted enough to see what Jesus had done. In seeing what Jesus had done and hearing John's words they believed. They let Jesus' works speak for themselves and it confirmed John. John said over and over that one "greater than me" is coming. They note that John never did the works of Jesus, and so Jesus actions uplifted Him already above their teacher, baptizer and mentor. His works confirmed who He was.

This is a message so significant to us. Our works confirm or deny our faith. They confirm or deny our words. It's pretty easy to recite a creed or a prayer. It's much more difficulty to live it. As scripture says, we are called to be not just hearers of the Word, not just speakers of the Word, but doers of the Word.

Greetings!

As we head back to a time of virtual worship together, we will try to beef up communications from the office as much as possible. Please let us know what you would like us to send you by way of printed studies, sermons, bulletins, newsletters, etc. We want you to be as in touch as possible. As always, if you need an ear or have a need, please feel free to contact us by phone, email, message, or text. This is difficult, but we will get through this together. We are also grateful for the continued giving through these last many months. As of this email we are just north of \$6,600 behind in the budget. The finance committee has asked that we communicate this to you, and also to let you know that any giving wished to be included in the 2020 calendar year be received by Tuesday December 29.

The decision to return to online only for a time was in response to the very strong urging of the conference as COVID cases, hospitalization, significant illnesses, and deaths continue to climb. There is also the question of liability as well as the ability to successfully inform any exposures through a season when often there are out of town visitors. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Having this all come together as Christmas approaches adds an additional layer of frustration and even deeper and sometimes darker feeling for many. Please be attentive to those around you, and if you sense a brokenness, reach out with the love of Christ.

The other side of being in these unique circumstances is that every new situation brings new opportunity. We have the opportunity to try something new and different. We have the opportunity to embrace old traditions in new ways. In the spirit of Advent we have the hope that soon we will be on the other end of this, the peace that comes from knowing in whom we have placed our trust, the love of Christ that infuses this season, and the joy that resides in our heart and can never be taken unless we allow it. Please nurture these and let them serve to make the season uniquely and unusually bright.

Many of you we haven't seen for some time. We understand. One of our main goals is that the love we have for one another be expressed in understanding each individual position and as a result, response to all that is going on. We want you safe. We want you healthy. We want to experience the celebration of coming together once again in the hopefully not too distant future. In order to touch base with those who haven't been able to pick up their 2021 envelopes, John West and I are using it as an excuse to drop by to share a smile with many of you sometime Friday morning as we drop them off. My hope is that we will see faces we haven't seen for a while, even if it's through the glass of a door and a happy wave hello.

Thank you for your patience through this. The plan presently is to Live Stream a Christmas Eve service at 7:00 on Christmas Eve. We hope you will join us as we celebrate. It will be one to remember. We do plan on singing as we light our own candle, so grab one and have it at the ready. Set up your own Advent wreath, and enjoy the warmth that I'm sure is all around you in your own Christmas setting with all you've done to make your space fitting to honor the birth of the King of Kings. Merry Christmas.

Blessings,

Pastor Brent