

“Who’s Your Shepherd?”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

based on the theme, “THE JESUS YOU MEET TODAY”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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John 10:11-18 [NRSV]

¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

I want to do something a little different this month. I want to take time to share a little exegesis with you. No, you don’t have to be over 18 to have that, and I promise it contains no trans-fats. Exegesis is what Biblical scholars do to learn more about Scripture. It digs below the surface and asks questions like, what was the historical setting of this writing? What do we know about way this writer uses words? What is the “sitz-in-leben?” Okay I was just showing off with that, but the first Biblical scholars who really dug into these questions were Germans, so I just wanted to prove to you I went to seminary.

Seriously, though, most of us pastors are afraid to tell you what we really know about Scripture from our seminary days, because we are afraid you will think we don’t really believe in the

Bible. Or we are afraid you will stop believing in the Bible, or something like that. But truth has a way of banishing fear, so I want to talk about the background to this passage and then share with you why I think it has even deeper meaning for us than it might if we didn’t know some of this. I also hope it will help you see how the Jesus you meet today is just as relevant as the Jesus of the first century.

So let’s dig in to the text. Scholars spend a lot of time debating when the Gospels were written and whether they were actually written by the original apostles. I am less interested in that because I don’t think it can be solved and I don’t think it tells us much. But I am interested in the approach that says the Gospels don’t just tell us about Jesus as if they were some direct history. They also tell us about the community of faith, that

is the church that they were first written for. This tells us that the writers were motivated to write these because they wanted to say to their churches, in a sense, “This is what Jesus said about that.” In other words, we can ask of the text, what is the question that underlies this answer? This gives us a way to listen to the stories and then ask ourselves if that same issue is still relevant today and if so then is Jesus’ response helpful or not?

The other aspect of “exegesis” that I find most helpful is to look at how words are used. When a writer uses a particular word repeatedly than that tells us that is an important word to that writer. It has special meaning. Same thing is true when a phrase is repeated. Let me give you two examples. Biblical scholars know that the phrase “I AM” was the English translation of the Hebrew word we pronounce “Yahweh.” Remember in the Old Testament when Moses asks God his name and God says, “Yahweh,” and then that is translated in the text as “I am,” or “I will be who I will be.” Well, knowing this, scholars notice that when we read John we will see several examples of Jesus saying “I am.” He says, I am the vine, I am the way the truth and the life, I am the bread of life. In this morning’s Scripture for instance, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” Scholars then hear that as a subtle code for Jesus identifying himself with the God Yahweh.

Okay, are you tired of this kind of stuff yet? Well, let me share just a bit more of what we can learn if read John more deeply than we might have.

Remember I said scholars look for repetitive words? Well in John there are a series of them: John talks about a lot of opposites: light-dark, know-unknowing, truth-untrue and similar opposites. In addition there are a number of times when people who would be Jewish talk about “the Jews” as if they were some other group. Raymond Brown, a Biblical scholar, says this would be like a natural born resident of Washington D.C. talking about “the Americans.” It is telling us the one writing and the one speaking that way would not consider themselves to be Jewish.

So what? Well, here are some of the guesses we make based on some of this knowledge and you can decide if it makes sense. Scholars believe that the community of faith that John wrote his gospel for was a group that was originally Jewish and worshipped together with other Jews in the synagogue. Part of that community probably began believing that Jesus, the rabbi, was a great teacher. They probably grew to believe that he was much more and began proclaiming him Son of God and things like that. This would have sounded like heresy to their fellow synagogue members. A conflict probably arose and at some point the two groups would have split. The Jewish side would say they threw the heretics out. The Jesus-believers would say they left.

Human nature being what it is each group would probably feel their faith was under attack. They would probably want to defend the claims they were making. They might even state their claims more strongly and make accusations against

the other group. This helps, in part, explain the kind of light/dark, know/don't know kinds of language. This community may have emerged under John's leadership, they may have weathered John's death and then had a variety of leaders follow him, some of them consistent with and as able as John, maybe some who weren't. It's possible there was even a battle over who was to be the leader and so the community needed to remember the original shepherd, the good shepherd. So let's try to take what we know and apply it to this passage.

Jesus says "I am the good shepherd." Then he goes on to describe the differences between himself and the alternatives. What that tells me is that there were other shepherd who were not good. They were hired hands or maybe even wolves. They allowed members of John's community to be "snatched," or "scattered." These bad shepherds left the sheep when they saw danger or got tired of their duties. So there were either outsiders who were trying to take over leadership of John's community of faith or there were insiders who were poor substitutes. So there may have been some kind of leadership issues either currently or in the past. At that point it would be important to remember what Jesus said a good shepherd is and does.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He knows his own and his own know him. There is that code word – know. It is important for the good shepherd to know his sheep and his sheep to know him. He says they know him by his voice. I think that means

more than the sound of his voice. I think that means there is an authority, a truth, in his words that rings true.

I find it very interesting that the good shepherd says he has sheep that do not belong to this one fold and that he must bring them in. Maybe the exclusivism of Christianity is misplaced. The good shepherd wants there to be unity in the flock, "one flock, one shepherd."

Finally, the good shepherd affirms that he has a positive relationship with God. The good shepherd was not rejected by God even though he was crucified. In fact, he lay down his life by his own power and he has the power to take it up again. What's more he doesn't do this simply on his own, he does it because it is what God commands, and he calls God his "Father." They have a close relationship, they are tight, we might say.

So let's see if we can relate this to our lives and to the Jesus we meet today. In my topic title today I ask us all the question, "Who's your shepherd?" I don't have time to tell you about all the bad shepherds. Most of you know them when you see them. If you are like me you have probably also been fooled before. I have listened to false shepherds, followed hirelings, and been abandoned to the wolves before. So have you. In the little bit of time we have left, let me try to clarify just who this Good Shepherd is and what makes him so Good and why you want HIM to be your shepherd.

When we recite the 23rd Psalm we say, ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,’ and it goes on to talk about going through deep, dark valleys of death and standing in the face of evil. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, because he had been to that valley and looked evil in the face. His 14-year-old son died and he had to figure out how to get through it. Then he wrote about it. Many years later he talked about that Psalm to Bob Abernathy on PBS. He said, “I was paraphrasing the twenty-third Psalm: ‘Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.’ The psalmist is not saying, ‘I will fear no evil because evil only happens to people who deserve it.’ He’s saying, ‘This is a scary, out-of-control world, but it doesn’t scare me, because I know that God is on my side, not on the side of the hijacker. God is on my side, not on the side of the illness, or the accident, or the terrible thing that happened. And that’s enough to give me the confidence.’ The twenty-third Psalm is the answer to the question, ‘How do you live in a dangerous, unpredictable, frightening world?’

“I want to believe in a loving God. And when you see children dying, when you see innocent people suffering, and when you see young parents stricken with an illness, how can you believe in a God of love and compassion unless you are prepared to say, ‘Some things happen in the world that God does not want to happen.’ God is good. Nature is not good. Nature is blind. Nature is amoral. Fire burns and bullets wound and falling

rocks injure and disease germs infect everybody, whether you deserve it or not.”¹

But the Psalm affirms “The Lord is my shepherd.” That shepherd is a good shepherd and we know him when we know Jesus Christ. The blessing of trusting him is that we come to the communion table and we see the sign in the bread and the cup that he provides for his sheep. We sense in his promise to be with us in this sacrament that he will lead us to green pastures and beside still waters. We are called to envision the Shepherd who will welcome all the sheep to his table, and that he has more sheep than any one church can contain. In communion we hear the echoes of his voice, the one who said, “I lay down my life for the sheep, and I take it up again.” And in hearing we know he has promised that we will too.

In a world full of “hirelings” and “wolves” it is important to know what shepherd we are following. Maybe it is more important though to remember that the Good Shepherd knows us, and knows the Father intimately and he will not let the hireling or the wolf snatch or scatter us. He lays down his life for the sheep and he took it back up again so that he can continue to be our Good Shepherd. I just hope that I know his voice well enough to listen to his voice. AMEN.

¹ Rabbi Harold Kushner, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” on PBS with Bob Abernathy pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week813.

