

The Good Shepherd

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, April 25, 2010)

Revelation was written in a time when Christians were being persecuted, so much had to be written in something like a code. In this passage, Jesus is called “the Lamb,” an image we understand today. But notice the inclusiveness of those who worship the lamb. Even when they were being persecuted, Christians looked forward to the day when people from all walks of life would gather before the throne and worship Jesus Christ. Listen to this powerful and beautiful image in Revelation 7:9-17 (TEV) ⁹After this I looked, and there was an enormous crowd—no one could count all the people! They were from every race, tribe, nation, and language, and they stood in front of the throne and of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They called out in a loud voice: “Salvation comes from our God, who sits on the throne, and from the Lamb!” ¹¹All the angels stood around the throne, the elders, and the four living creatures. Then they threw themselves face downward in front of the throne and worshiped God, ¹²saying, “Amen! Praise, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, and might belong to our God forever and ever! Amen!”

¹³One of the elders asked me, “Who are these people dressed in white robes, and where do they come from?”

¹⁴“I don’t know, sir. You do,” I answered.

He said to me, “These are the people who have come safely through the terrible persecution. They have washed their robes and made them white with the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵That is why they stand before God’s throne and serve him day and night in his temple. He who sits on the throne will protect them with his presence. ¹⁶Never again will they hunger or thirst; neither sun nor any scorching heat will burn them, ¹⁷because the Lamb, who is in the center of the throne, will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Jesus also used many images when he taught, referring to himself as the Son of Man, Son of God, but perhaps one of the most familiar was “The Good Shepherd.” You would think that the religious people of his day would have understood these images, but maybe they came to Jesus with an attitude problem. Jesus confronts this attitude as he responds to some people who met him in the temple and asked for a “plain answer.” Try to understand their attitude problem through the answer Jesus gives to them, in John 10:22-30 (NRSV) ²²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” ²⁵Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one.”

Tell me plainly. Give me a straight answer. Just tell me yes or no. Or as Sgt. Joe Friday used to say on television so many years ago, “Just the facts, Ma’am, just the facts.” These are comments we often make in the middle of complicated situations. We grow weary of hearing how complex our society and its problems have become, so we begin to look for the simple answers that cut right to the heart of the matter. But it was a wise sage that said, “If anybody has a simple answer to the problems of our day, they probably don’t understand the problem.”

Sometimes we hear these same demands for a simple answer in regard to our faith. How do you know Jesus was raised from the dead? How do you explain some of the apparent contradictions in the Bible? Can you sum it all up in just one sentence? Even the Jews who were with Jesus in the Portico of Solomon in the temple wanted a straightforward answer. Are you the Messiah? Tell us plainly. Jesus answered – “I have told you, and you do not believe.”

Let’s look at Jesus’ answer in a little more detail: The first part of his response was that the works he was doing in his Father’s name testified to him. This should be plain enough, easily understood by the Pharisees. First, Jesus taught in parables, a style of teaching common to the day, easily understood. Furthermore, he explained Scripture in a way that astounded his listeners. Remember his encounter in the Synagogue in Nazareth, recorded in Luke’s Gospel. At first, when he read from the prophet, Isaiah, all spoke well of him.

Although many were offended, as in the synagogue in Nazareth, his fame as a teacher spread throughout the region, and many flocked to hear him. And third, although this may have been most important for quite a few people, he performed many healing miracles. When John the Baptist asked for proof on whether Jesus was the Messiah, he specifically referred to the blind receiving their sight, the deaf hearing and the lame walking. Such actions could be seen clearly enough, and Jesus pointed to them as signs of the kingdom of God breaking in.

But Jesus not only taught and healed, he was willing to meet the hard issues head on. The story of his cleansing of the temple is one illustration that comes to mind. And he dealt firmly with the question on whether or not to pay taxes, saying, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." And he strongly and decisively entered their theological debates, answering their question about the greatest commandment (to love the Lord your God and to love your neighbor). From there he went on to teach about obedience to God through his actions toward others, meeting people face to face, caring and loving all kinds of people, and especially reaching out to sinners, showing God's love through his openness to them. Obedience to God was his highest purpose, even when obedience ended in crucifixion. That ultimate obedience should have been the complete and simple answer, especially when seen in the light of the resurrection.

We might condemn those Jews who gathered around him in the portico of Solomon in our lesson, but they did not yet see Christ in the light of the resurrection. But even more important, according to Jesus, they were not at all interested in becoming part of his flock. Jesus told them, just as he tells us, we cannot understand his message if we refuse to follow him.

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd becomes more powerful as you grow in understanding of this image. Think about that image as it was projected in the time of Christ. The shepherd spent a lot of time with his sheep. He protected them, he lead them to green pastures, and he brought them safely to the fold in the night. He would speak to the sheep and the sheep learned to recognize the voice. They learned to trust that voice for food, for shelter and for safety. But they had to spend time with the shepherd to build that relationship. A stranger, even a good stranger, might come to lead the flock to fresh pastures and clear streams, but if the sheep did not know the voice of the new shepherd, they would not follow. The shepherd could speak as plainly as you can to sheep, but if they didn't know the shepherd, they wouldn't understand and they wouldn't follow. In the same way, Jesus is telling the Jews who were questioning him, you need to follow me to understand and know the plain truth. I am the Messiah, I am God's Son. But if you don't follow me, if you are not a part of my fold, you will never know the truth, no matter what I say to you.

This can be such a helpful image for us today. How can you know Christ if you are not a part of his fold? The acquaintance will be superficial at best. But if you truly follow him, in worship, in study, in prayer, in partaking of the Sacraments, then the words will become plain and make so much more sense. Jesus is the Messiah, God's Anointed One, not just to the Jews, but Jesus is the Messiah, the one who delivers, for all people.

There are many frightening images in Revelation. It was written in a frightening time. Much of what was said had to be in hidden language. If you can understand the culture and politics of that day, you can understand some of these images. Maybe they have relevance for today, but I would caution against trying to interpret too much into these horrifying images. On the other hand, there is so much in Revelation that is beautiful and positive and comforting. For example our lesson for today, where we hear that the congregation gathered before the lamb includes all nations, all languages, it is all-inclusive. That call from God goes out to all people, even people we don't understand, even people we don't agree with, even people we don't like.

God calls all people to be his sheep. God, in Christ, calls all to follow him, and promises all people eternal life, if they but listen to his voice and follow him. AND no one will snatch them out of his hand. This may be the most reassuring image of all. If we follow Jesus, he will hold us in his hand, and no one, nothing, not even death, will snatch us out of God's hand.

This may be the most comforting image in our Gospel lesson. Jesus is the Good Shepherd and calls us to follow him. If we respond, if we listen to his voice, and become part of his flock, we will have the plain and simple answer, and we will know that Jesus is the Son of God, and he will let no one snatch us from his hand. We are protected and sheltered through all life's troubled times, even through death itself.

May you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, may you know Him as your Shepherd, your savior, and may you be held safely in God's hands, now and forever, Amen.