

Scriptures:

1 John 3:16-24

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

Out With The Shepherd

“Be honest, when you heard the readings this mornings, how many of you pictured Jesus the Good Shepherd looking something like this?

image: http://wp.production.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/files/2015/04/5691332557_dc61090240_b-208x300.jpg



Via Waiting for the Word (Flickr)

It’s the immediate image that comes to mind, and there’s nothing inherently wrong with it really. This image is ubiquitous in Christianity.”¹ Most of us have seen it or something just like it across the world. “Of course, there’s a lot missing from this kind of picture. For a shepherd who is supposed to be sleeping and working outside, there’s a surprising lack of dirt. He doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy who would smell like sheep, dung, and body odor. I wouldn’t expect to see him trudging through the rocky Palestinian hills in search of a patch of grass with a bunch of stubborn sheep. I see him instead walking through a field of wildflowers with happy frolicking lambs bouncing around him as music swells in the background.”

... It’s not very realistic. A ‘good’ shepherd would be stronger looking, rougher, less pristine. “But we see these images of Jesus as a doe-eyed good shepherd, cuddling a tiny helpless lamb or carrying one over his shoulders, and it’s a comforting and nostalgic image for us. We

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2015/04/the-shepherd-who-casts-us-out-a-homily-for-good-shepherd-sunday/>

immediately begin to think of Psalm 23 perhaps, of never wanting for anything, of having a banquet table prepared for us in the presence of our enemies, of still waters and green pastures. It's an image of gentle power, of someone who can control the uncontrollable in our world. And isn't that what we want of Jesus?

We want Jesus to tame what is wild and unruly in the world, who with the crook of his staff, can solve what is unsolvable and answer what is unanswerable in life, who can protect and defend against the thieves and bandits of this world who come only to steal, kill, and destroy.

Regardless of what we want, though, we eventually come face-to-face with the reality that the world is still wild and unruly, that there are still questions without answers, that there are still thieves and bandits in the world bent on destruction."

It is a hard truth. It is the kind of thing people challenge a minister with all the time. Explain then... why... "Sixteen people, including players, coaching staff, a play-by-play broadcast, a statistician and an athletic therapist, died as a result of injuries suffered on April 6 when the Bronco's team bus was involved in a crash with a semi-truck at a highway intersection in eastern Saskatchewan."² Explain why are there constant stories of mass shootings and natural disasters. What about Syria, what about... fill in the blank that hits closest to home...

Where was the Good Shepherd in the midst of recent shootings? In the midst of kidnappings and executions? In the midst of the bus crash? In the midst of violence against people of the wrong race or sexual orientation? Where is the shepherd that will sanitize all that is wrong with the world, who will clean up all that is messy and misplaced in our lives?

Did you read or listen to Sean Brandow's message at the memorial of the Humboldt Bronco's - if not... it is worth looking at. After admitting he didn't want to be there he wrote of Psalm 23 "The only part of that Psalm that was just read, for about 15 hours that I heard in my head was: Even though I walk through the valley of darkness. That's all I heard. That's it. That's it. That's all that went through my head, this is it, this is the valley of death, this is the valley of darkness. And all I saw was darkness. All I saw was hurt and anguish and fear and confusion. And I had nothing. Nothing. I'm a pastor, I'm supposed to have something.

I received thousands of texts. I looked over at Chris and his phone was dead and my phone was dead and we're trying to give answers. Thousands of texts, 'heh we're praying of you,' 'we're thinking of you,' 'be strong.' And we needed those, we needed those texts, your families, they needed those texts, we needed to hear those things, that the support was much bigger than me and Chris and the families. Four times, four times in the last 48 hours, in the midst of all the darkness, I didn't realize, but four times four people sent me passages of scripture and I didn't realize what that meant until today.

I had understood the support of people and I needed that, and you need that, you family members, you need that, you need to hear that people love you, that people care, that people are praying, that you're supported, that you are loved, you'll be looked after in the future. Those are important things. But when it was so dark, I needed to hear from God. And only four times, and that's all it took — four words from God were bigger than a thousand words from any human being.

² <https://globalnews.ca/news/4154965/humboldt-broncos-bus-crash-rcmp-update/>

Someone reminded me that there's more to that Psalm than 'we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.' You need to finish the statement, someone told me. 'I will fear no evil because you're with me.'

And as the Psalm starts, 'The Lord is my shepherd.' It took 15 hours of darkness to really understand that I had a shepherd that was walking with me. I don't know if that made it any softer, but it made it better."³ Where is the good shepherd? Where is God? He is with us. When you feel like you are walking the valley of the shadow of death - and let's be honest I know some of you have felt that kind of darkness recently. Where is God - She is right there with you whether you feel like you are a part of the fold or not. You are not alone.

David R. Henson when preaching after a tragic shooting in his community asked all the questions of why and where is God and then he reflected "I asked myself these questions as I read over this text, and it struck me these questions come from a misreading of these good shepherd passages in John. Because, really, what I was asking for was to live within the walled-off reality of the sheepfold. The sheepfold was essentially a secure pen in the wilderness constructed of large stones. It kept the sheep safe and guarded by a gatekeeper while the shepherd was away.

I asked, in the midst of tragedy, where the shepherd was, and I didn't like the answer the text gave. Because it meant, I'd gotten the safe-and-secure image of the shepherd wrong all these years.

I'd always assumed the shepherd was leading the flock to safety. But that's not really the case is it? Instead, the shepherd arrives to the sheepfold and calls the sheep away from the safety of the walled-off pen. And they follow the shepherd.

Not to safety, but to the open wilderness.

Because that's where the shepherd always is.

The shepherd isn't in the sheepfold. The shepherd is beyond its boundaries, beyond the walls, beyond a place of safety and comfort. The shepherd comes to drive out his sheep from safety into pasture where there is abundant life.

Abundant life is not necessarily a safe life, mind you. Out beyond the sheep pen, there is most certainly green pasture and still waters, but there are also roaming predators, wolves and bandits. There is also a valley shadowed by death.

Now, it's not just our images of the shepherd we've sanitized and cleaned up. We've done it to our text as well. We sheepishly say that Jesus simply "brings out all his own" from the sheep pen, but the Greek is so much more interesting. The verb used here is actually the exact same verb gospel writers use to describe the violent casting out of demons.

The shepherd casts out his sheep from the safety of the pen. Suddenly, these sheep who have heard the shepherd's voice are quite literally — out cast.

In the gospel of John's historical context, this makes sense. Written the latter half of the 1st century and after the destruction of the Temple by Roman military forces, John's gospel is set

³ <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/humboldt-pastors-anguished-speech-where-was-god/>

amidst an intense conflict within Judaism, which resulted in the expulsion of Jewish-Christians from the synagogue, according to William Herzog II, a scholar of the New Testament. In other words, like the sheep in the story, early followers of Christ were cast out from the safety of the sheepfold.

So, this text could very well have offered comfort to these outcast Jews who followed Christ by reminding them that Jesus was outside the sheepfold and that all they had to do was continue to follow his voice to find good pasture to restore their souls. Still it must have been terrifying and painful to have to leave the safe sanctuary of the faith of their fathers and mothers. It must have hurt to have the doors of the religious institutions shut in their faces because of their beliefs. It must have been incredibly disorienting to feel like they no longer belonged in the faith that birthed their own faith.”⁴

Sometimes it even feels like that for us United Church kind of Christians. I know many Christians don't believe I'm a Christian at all just because I'm UCC. In all honesty I wouldn't be a Christian any other way. I can't be a Christian that supports the powers of greed, racism, misogyny, selfish salvation. If it is not about love for all then for me it is not going to fly. The Good Shepherd is good not because he fixes everything but because he lays down his life for everyone. For those who fit in and those who don't. For those who stay in the sheep pen and those who are outcast.

There is a reason I get so focussed on 'the neighbours' and not just the members of the church. There is a reason when I am categorized theologically I land in the 'missional' category. Because the thing that has always stood out for me about Jesus is how often in the Gospels he breaks bread with the outcasts and those society considered sinners. Jesus held outsiders up as examples of faith, Jesus chose the despised to befriend. Jesus says that whenever we see the hungry, the poor, the lonely, the disenfranchised — the outcast — we are seeing Jesus himself. There was a reason I wanted to be a minister of a church way back in 2009 that was considering a joint project with the local community services and it was because they wanted to care for their community and their neighbours. There is a reason I am still here because I believe living into that mission that has been created with this facility is what God is calling us to now.

Because the good shepherd calls us out I have been in the midst of a lot of challenging pastoral care recently. Having built this building more and more folks outside of the church walls getting to know Squamish United Church, our mission and myself. That means I have been called into homes and hospital rooms of people who have never darkened the door of the church. I have journeyed with the dying, I have journeyed with people going through abusive relationships, I have been walking through some big stuff lately because Jesus calls us out.

So I wonder when we hear the voices of those outcasts in our society, those disenfranchised and marginalized, if we hear that voice for what it is. “The voice of Jesus — the voice of the shepherd — calling us out from the safety of the sheepfold to be a flock of the cast-out.

⁴ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2015/04/the-shepherd-who-casts-us-out-a-homily-for-good-shepherd-sunday/>

I'm not suggesting we all sell our possessions and give them to the poor, though Jesus does. I'm not suggesting we hold our possessions and money in common so that none among us will be in need, though that's how Acts says the early church functioned.

I'm not suggesting we need to spend more time among the outcast and marginalized because it makes us good people and better Christians to serve those in need or to lend a helping hand. To do so would miss the point of being cast out of the safety of the sheep pen. The point is not to do what is right or to help others out. The point is simply to be where the shepherd is. And the shepherd isn't in the sheep pen.

As Lilla Watson, an aboriginal woman in Australia explained to well-intentioned folk coming to help the outcast there, ““If you come here to help me, you are wasting our time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

That is the point. That in some way, this boundary-crossing shepherd is calling us to the idea that our liberation — our salvation — is tied up with the salvation and liberation of all people.

And that is why the shepherd comes to the sheep pen and calls us out into the wild pasture.

Because that is where salvation — abundant life — is waiting.”⁵

⁵ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2015/04/the-shepherd-who-casts-us-out-a-homily-for-good-shepherd-sunday/>