

Sheep Without a Shepherd

The fourth Sunday of Eastertide has long been a special one for this church. For those of you who are new and for those who may have forgotten, this Sunday has been marked since 1970 by our liturgical brothers and sisters as Good Shepherd Sunday, with the Gospel reading in the Revised Common Lectionary always coming from John 10, in which Jesus uses the ancient metaphor of the Good Shepherd to describe his own work among God's people. I've taken great delight, since I've been your pastor, in using those Gospel readings as well as some from the Old Testament to especially inform us as to the joy, comfort, and responsibility of being known as Good Shepherd Baptist Church.

This year, as I've been mentioning, I'm not following the Revised Common Lectionary, in which it's Year B, but rather utilizing a new supplement called "Year D," as proposed by Presbyterian scholar Timothy Matthew Slemmons. Rev. Dr. Slemmons, in my opinion, has done an outstanding job of creating this new lectionary year to utilize more of the Bible in readings for Sundays while retaining appropriate focus on the liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. Today is no exception as he has created a lineup that honors the tradition of Good Shepherd Sunday as the fourth Sunday of Easter while using readings which the traditional three-year lineup does not feature.

You've just heard the Old Testament and Gospel readings selected by Slemmons as well as the Psalm which we used for our Call to Worship. What I'd like to do next is to compare the historical context of Zechariah 13 with that of John 16 as well as our current political and religious situation. That should allow the messages of both passages to become clear to us before we consider what our appropriate response is. Like the Children of Israel in Zechariah's time, like the disciples of Jesus present for his last Passover meal with them, we can sometimes feel like sheep without a shepherd but there is always hope present for the Beloved Community.

I've only preached from Zechariah once before in my years with you all, so please don't feel like you've missed something if the little book is unfamiliar to you. The very first verse in the book gives the reader the date for the beginning of Zechariah's prophetic ministry: "In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berechiah son of Iddo." Zechariah, then, is a post-exilic prophet, preaching to the remnant of Israel who have returned from Babylon to Jerusalem along with Zerubbabel, heir of the house of David but appointed by the Persians to lead his people back to their homeland. It is the time of the reconstruction of Jerusalem and of its Temple, as recorded for us by the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This earliest of Zechariah's oracles comes within months of the last oracle of the older prophet, Haggai, and Zechariah's work gives indications of being a continuance of Haggai's.

Many scholars, however, now believe that only the first eight chapters of the book are actually the work of Zechariah, son of Berechiah. Chapters 9-14 are very different in style and seem to be addressing a different situation. Most of the scholars who divide the book into First Zechariah and Second Zechariah place these latter chapters into a time approximately 200 or more years later. The Persian Emperor Cyrus was so revered by the Jews for enabling their return to the Promised Land that he was called God's Anointed or Messiah by Isaiah, but the Persians have been supplanted as the power in the Middle East by the Hellenic Empire. This group of Greek-speakers were initially led by Alexander the Great, who emerged from his native

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Macedonia to not only defeat their Greek overlords but to create his own empire from Greece to India in the east and Egypt to the south.

Alexander, you may recall, died young and his great empire was almost immediately plunged in civil war to determine who would rule. For forty years, his would-be successors, known as the Diadochi, fought it out until the empire was divided into four pieces. Most importantly to our story, the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria continued to vie for supremacy in their part of the empire. The Promised Land of the Jews was, as always, the crossroads for the Egyptian kingdom and that of the power to the east.

For the audience of Second Zechariah, then, this was a time of great transition and upheaval. They had gone from the much-lauded peace and easy rule of the Persians to the near-continual warfare between Alexander's "Diadochi." If this was not bad enough, the earlier part of Zechariah 13 reveals that the people had completely lost faith in the integrity of their prophets. Zechariah gives this word from the LORD of Hosts: "I will remove from the land the prophets and the unclean spirit. And if any prophets appear again, their fathers and mothers who bore them will say to them, 'You shall not live, for you speak lies in the name of the Lord.'" The people of Israel were without political leadership and without spiritual leadership. They were like sheep without a shepherd.

Fast forward around 300 years to the time of Jesus. In the interim, there was briefly an independent kingdom of Israel following the successful revolt against the Seleucids led by Judas Maccabee, "the Hammer," and his followers. The resulting Hasmonean kingdom, however, has first fallen into the orbit of the Roman Empire and then been completely taken over by the Romans. The Romans have allowed "client kings" or, to be more blunt, puppet rulers over Galilee (Herod Antipas) and Itrurea (Phillip) but Judaea is now a Roman province under Pontius Pilate. Religiously, there is a High Priest but he and his party, the Sadducees, have to vie for the hearts of the people with the Pharisees and the Essenes. Little wonder that most Jews would have felt like sheep without a shepherd. As we come to our passage in John 16, even the disciples of Jesus are about to be plunged into a time of transition and wondering. Within twenty-four hours, their beloved master will be betrayed, denied, tortured, killed and buried. Although Jesus has prepared them for the coming of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, they will very shortly feel like sheep without a shepherd.

As I observe the world around us in the United States of 2018, I read and hear from any number of people who feel very much like sheep without a shepherd. In the last two years, we have gone from a leader in our Federal government who, though not without his flaws and some serious, seemed generally to be moving the country in the right direction, to an administration that I have heard variously described as a kleptocracy, rule by thieves, or as a kakistocracy, rule by the absolute worst. Frankly, I'm not sure which is a more appropriate description. Keeping in mind the admonition of Jesus to love even the enemy, I'm also very aware of the way in which he publicly chastised those who preyed on the poor, those who were hypocritical about religious faith and practice, and those who ignored the cries of their neighbor. I am occasionally reminded that if we ask "What Would Jesus Do?" then overthrowing tables and chasing people with a whip is one option.

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If we feel like sheep without a shepherd at the highest level of our government, our perception of our national religious leaders may be just as dire. As we think of all the scandals that have cut down the would-be religious leaders in the U.S., scandals of sexual impropriety and financial self-dealing and the rest, it may seem like no religious leader who has caught the national attention has lasted long since that “early morning, April 4” 1968, when a “shot (rang) out in the Memphis sky.” Rev. Dr. King had turned his attention from the Civil Rights of African-Americans to the human rights of all people in the Poor People’s Campaign. He had gone, as they say, from preachin’ to meddlin’ and it got him killed. Oh, there have been a few who have acted as the moral conscious of America since MLK but not without shadow. Billy Graham was one but many have not forgiven his cozying up to Richard Nixon nor his silence or worse on the topic of LGBTQ rights. Jimmy Carter may be our most successful “former president” but the failure of his administration causes many to discount his leadership. There may be new spiritual leadership for America on the horizon but we do not yet have an established shepherd on the national level.

For some of you, there may be real concern over spiritual leadership on the local level, too. I have just four more Sundays in this pulpit before my second time of Sabbatical from this post begins. For three months, I will be absent from you. I won’t be in the office during the week; I won’t be teaching on Wednesday nights; I won’t be preaching on Sundays until September 9th. Those of you who weren’t at Good Shepherd seven years ago when we did this before may be wondering, “Who will be our shepherd this summer?” It is a time of transition.

If that litany leaves you feeling like a sheep without a shepherd, then hear the Good News. God will not leave you, leave us, without comfort and care. Let’s go back to Zechariah and hear the words of promise. The passage begins ominously. God calls for the sword to fall on the one whom God calls, “my shepherd ...the man who is my associate.” Robert Nguyen Cramer of BibleTexts.com notes that the Hebrew here for “associate” is often translated as “equal” or “nearest kinsman.” For Christians, the only one equal to or kinsman to God is the Son, the Christ. God continues, “Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones.” I would interpret this less as God’s intention and more as the recognition of what humankind, granted free will by God, will inevitably do. Those leaders raised up by God and faithful to God will be in conflict with the powers that be, whether it is in the era of the Seleuceds, of the Roman Empire, or of our own dominant culture. Remove the shepherd and the sheep will scatter. Many will fall away, crushed under the heel of empire. But for those who are faithful – “They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people’; and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God.’”

Jesus clearly has this prophecy from Zechariah in mind when he speaks to the disciples on the night he was betrayed. He does not refer to himself here as the shepherd but it is obviously implied: “The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone.” Just as Zechariah gives the word of hope on behalf of the One he calls “Yahweh of Hosts,” so Jesus gives his disciples the word of hope from the One he called “Father”: “Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”

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For both Zechariah and Jesus, the last word to the sheep of the missing shepherd is hope. They are not abandoned. God will claim them as God's people. God will send the Comforter, who will be with them and us forever. In one of my favorite passages, Paul adds his version of this for the Christians in Rome, echoing in part the words of Jesus who declared himself as conqueror: "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So, what is to be our response, Good Shepherd Baptist Church, to this time of transition, both locally and nationally? Again, for those of you who may not have been here seven years ago or for whom that time has retreated from memory, let me reassure you. You may find my time of absence significant but I both hope and believe that it will be significant for you as well as for me in a positive way. Our congregation is well-led by our deacons and by other lay leaders. The title of Pastor, a word derived from the Latin for shepherd, may be mine but I am not the only shepherd here and leadership for our church has come from those lay leaders every bit as often as from me and all of us are ultimately led by God through the Holy Spirit. Also, you will have for those fifteen weeks of my absence the blessed opportunity to hear from preachers with viewpoints different from mine. I do my best to faithfully bring you the word that God puts on my heart each week but as we all know I am just one man and a remarkably flawed one at that. I ask you for my sake as well as for your own, don't turn your back on these brothers and sisters. Don't take an extended vacation from this body. Come and hear them with good will and listen for the new lessons they have for you and for the old lessons that we may have forgotten or that I may have neglected. Show yourselves as good hosts, one and all, and care for these who come to serve you in my absence. I believe that, just as I return to you refreshed, so you, too, will be refreshed and with new growth in your faith and wisdom. Persist in our time of temporary transition.

And what about the national scene? Where will we find leadership there? In terms of political leadership, candidates are already lining up for state and national elections that could change the balance of power on both levels. Pay attention. Learn about the candidates. Send them e-mails and letters and call them while they are still trying to decide what is important to voters. Every active voter has an outsized impact, even on the national level. Persist in what you know to be right.

And for spiritual leadership? As I intimated, I believe a new figure, seizing the mantle dropped by Dr. King, is emerging. Cornel West, the respected Princeton professor and author has said, "(Rev. Dr.) William Barber is the closest person we have to Martin Luther King Jr. in our midst." Writing for the Washington Post, Cleve R. Wootson, Jr. says, "Barber's admirers say his sermons and speeches, which have intertwined the religious tenets of love, justice and mercy that exist in all faiths with an American vision of morality baked into the Constitution, steal the moral high ground long claimed by political conservatives. ...That message of a common moral duty helped Barber build the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina. ...Barber said he sees his efforts as the unfinished work of King, who was assassinated in 1968 shortly after announcing a campaign to improve the lives of poor people."

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Rev. Dr. William Barber and Rev. Liz Theoharris have announced a new Poor People's Campaign, picking up where Dr. King was fatally forced from the field. They and advocates across the country will soon launch 40 days of coordinated action at statehouses around the country. The campaign will focus on what Dr. King described as the "triple evils" of racism, poverty and militarism — with the addition of ecological devastation, a global crisis that disproportionately affects people living in poverty. Connie and I have personally volunteered for the campaign. I plan to be present at the nonviolent protests in Olympia during those 40 days. I may be arrested on behalf of the poor of our state – I hope that doesn't shock you. If you want to learn more about the campaign, and I hope you do, the website address is on the back of the bulletin and also on the insert.

Are we living in difficult transition times? Yes, we are. Does it feel like we are sheep without a shepherd? It certainly can. But our Loving Creator, Yahweh of Hosts, is always our Good Shepherd. Through the Holy Spirit, our everlasting Comforter, we still have access to Jesus, the Good Shepherd who walked among us. As those who still carry the name of the Good Shepherd into this world, we are called to take our certainty and our comfort and to persist in being both leaders and comforters to the world around us. No matter how dire the wolf at the door may be, persist! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.