

“God Is Still Speaking”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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Psalm 23

John 10:1-10

¹*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

²*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:*

*he leadeth me beside the still waters.*³*He restoreth my soul:*

Psalm 23:1-3

Let us pray... O God,

May we not be distressed if we do not picture you as we did when we were children,
but may we trust that it is only we who change – and not you, as we grow up.

May we continually re-discover your nature as a God who cares for us

like the ‘Good Shepherd’ that Jesus was, and that you are still speaking to us –
still calling for us like the wayward lambs we so often are.

Amen

When I was in seminary, I was part of a special program called the Arts Ensemble
in which we prepared a service of worship using a variety of art forms,
drama, and styles of music.

For two weeks in January, we took it on the road to various churches
ranging from eastern Pennsylvania out to Ohio and West Virginia
and south to Maryland.

Keeping a journal for the time our group visited churches in Pennsylvania,
I made note of themes portrayed in stained-glass window art.

Now this was E&R territory – the home of Evangelical & Reformed congregations
before they joined with Congregational-Christian churches to become
the United Church of Christ in 1957.

The architecture and interior art work of E&R churches often
reflect their Lutheran and Catholic roots, with church buildings
in a medieval style of gray stone and stained-glass.

These churches were also in agricultural communities
and frequently there would be one pastor for several churches
such as a ‘two’ or ‘three’ – or even a ‘four-point charge’.

There were also ‘union churches’ of one building shared by two congregations,
UCC and Lutheran, each with their own pastor.

The most frequent design for a stained-glass window in the sanctuary
was the “Good Shepherd” by Bernhard Plockhorst –
an artist of the German Romantic style.

[Slide One]

The popularity of “The Good Shepherd” theme makes sense
for a pastoral region that would be familiar with flocks of sheep as well as
herds of dairy cattle and pigs, too.

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Jesus represented as a “good shepherd” as an important symbol for who he was, with examples from the 3rd to the 6th Century CE of stone sculptures, ‘fresco’ wall-paintings, and mosaics.

[Slide Two]

That was an era when shepherds were fairly common to be seen in the countryside of most places in the ancient world.

<http://www.jesuswalk.com/christian-symbols/good-shepherd.htm>

People back then recognized what a shepherd was and knew what they were like as not necessarily reputable, hence the distinction of Jesus being a ‘good’ shepherd.

How many of us these days have ever even seen a shepherd – let alone know what they do.

We have these images and references to shepherds in the stories of David as well as Psalm 23 that idealize for us what Jesus meant to people long ago as one who provides for and defends those who are gathered under that one’s care – Jesus himself symbolizing the One Who sent him.

We tend to ignore other aspects of the role of shepherd – like the rough business of shearing time, and even killing a sheep for food or sacrifice.

Still, when you think of it, Jesus came into the world ‘at the fullness of time’ when there were very literal roles for people as shepherds and fishermen, soldiers and tax collectors, beggars and bandits, landlords and stewards, sowers and reapers, kings and peasants, scribes and Pharisees, prophets and priests, men and women.

All these characters populate the Bible stories serving as illustrations for the generations of people in their wide diversity of cultures that encountered Christianity in the millennia ever since.

In some ways, they are the alphabet for Western culture in how we describe who we are, where we came from, and where we are going.

What new imagery might we come up with?

I don’t know, but an artist named Annie Vallotton did a series of line drawings to accompany the ‘Good News Bible for Modern Man’ that touched on classic themes and became classics themselves.

They are elegantly simple line drawings, yet unique, bringing the old stories to life in a new way.

It is a style I admire. Can you tell what this is...?

[Go to Surfacepro tablet]

Willard, p.3

In Christianity, we have a rich heritage of symbolic imagery
beginning with the cross – the form of both a crucified person
and a person with arms outstretched in welcome.

Yet the first portrayals of Jesus were about the nature of God through Christ –
like a benevolent shepherd who loves his or her lambs
and would even die to defend the flock.

God is still speaking to us as people of the 21st Century CE
even with such timeless images made new.

Amen

*Our first lesson today is Psalm 23, one of the most familiar texts
from the Bible –*

If you know the King James Version, I invite you to say it along with me...

¹The LORD is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

John 10:1-10

[Jesus said,]

¹“Truly, truly, I say to you,

he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way,
that man is a thief and a robber;

² but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.

³ To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice,
and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them,
and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him,
for they do not know the voice of strangers.”

⁶ This figure Jesus used with them,
but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So Jesus again said to them,

“Truly, truly, I say to you,
I am the door of the sheep.

⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers;
but the sheep did not heed them.

⁹ I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved,
and will go in and out and find pasture.

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;
I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.