

John 10: 11 – 18 and Psalm 23: “Sheepish ?”

Newtonbrook United Church – May 2, 2009



We have just heard about Jesus saying, “***I am the Good Shepherd.***”¹ Jesus said that twice.

We have also sung the 23rd Psalm. How many people here enjoyed singing that Psalm?

I’m not sheepish about saying this - I don’t know how to say this without being forthright - but I think that if today’s scripture passages need an update in their language, and that this is an example of the need for congregations to move into 21st century ways of thinking about our how we communicate our faith.

We may say that, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” – **BUT** how many people here might consider it a compliment to be called a sheep? How many of your neighbours would be complimented if you were to say something that meant they were a sheep? I suspect that some might feel insulted. What about the youth who live in an individualistic society – do they want to be thought of being herded about, “like sheep?”

Because I’ve been in church most of my life, I know what the metaphors of sheep and shepherd mean to people in the church. In church we do not have any problem with communicating in these metaphors – as long as we are talking with each other.

We know that Psalm 23 means that:

- 1) The paths of righteousness for God’s sake are also the dangerous paths leading to justice through confrontations with those who maintain the comfort and benefits of the status quo.
- 2) There are valleys that are dark, deep and profound – emptied of the light of day. As Douglas Hall says, Christians are called to be stewards of life in the kingdom of death.
- 3) And there is the table that is spread with **abundant** food, BUT it happens to be surrounded by enemies. Our **communion table**, that is open to all, is surrounded by competitive forces that want

¹ John 10:14.

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the best bread and wine of God’s love to go to the highest bidder.

- 4) God has provided for us in abundance – WE ARE BLESSED – but we live in a society that propogonizes that we must settle for scarcity, and live as if we will never have enough!

We know these things to be true. That is our faith. Still, my sense is that we need to be able to communicate **God’s unconditional love** in a manner that is relevant to an urban society in the 21st century. We need to find new words that are meaningful to people who have begun to search for what really matters in a consumer society – especially now that there is proof that the market is not God.

It is my sense that the old metaphors and images have lost their power. Sheep and shepherds just aren’t what they used to be. The world outside our doors has changed and people at the corner of Yonge and Cummer aren’t buying and selling sheep any more – not in the 16 months that I’ve been here.

In the church we continue to use the same words to communicate, over and over again, and we wonder why we are not getting different results. The version of the 23rd Psalm that we sang a few minutes ago was written in 1650. What else do you use today that is over 350 years old?

What might be a similar image in our language today?

I don’t know the answer to that question.

This is a time for everyone in the congregation to turn to your neighbour and, in pairs, explore that question for two minutes.

Congregational responses

Any image or metaphor that needs an explanation isn’t up to the job.

Of course, some may argue that this is scripture and we cannot change the words.

My response would be to ask what truth these words are attempting to capture. What is it that has been reduced to these words that humans use to communicate with each other?

Where is there any good news in this?

Two things:

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- 1) we know in our hearts that God’s unconditional love will always be with us;
- 2) the second piece of good news is that by facing up to the question, we have already begun to move towards new language. We have begun a conversation; we will talk with others and seek their ideas; we know that we are not alone and that, TOGETHER, we will move forward.

One of our United Church of Canada musicians attempted to tackle this issue and Sylvia Dunstan came up with the following song:

Hymn # 210 – You, Lord, Are both Lamb and Shepherd