

Sermon Notes from CMJ
Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year B

RCL Readings – Acts 4:5-12, Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

ACNA Readings – Ezekiel 34:1-10; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:1-10; John 10:11-16

Introduction. The Fourth Sunday in the Easter season is also called Good Shepherd Sunday and includes the familiar shepherd readings of John 10 and Psalm 23. The metaphor of the good shepherd is deeply messianic and even more so in light of the Resurrection.

Common Theme. Shepherds and shepherding are the obvious themes in this Sunday’s readings. We all need a shepherd. Unfortunately, the experience of flawed human leadership can convince so many people to think that they don’t. The ancient philosopher Plato recorded that the best form of government was based on virtue and justice and headed by someone who was the best at all things. No human has achieved such heights, but the good news is that no mere man sits on the throne. The risen Messiah can accomplish all things as the Good Shepherd.

Acts 4:5-12. The public healing of the crippled man by Apostles Peter and John attracts the attention of the temple leadership. The issue was not the healing itself, an obvious miracle, but the preaching of the resurrection. Temple leadership at this time was dominated by the sect of the Sadducees who held to a limited canon of Scripture and denied the doctrine of the resurrection at the end of days. During the time of the Second Temple, they convened in a building on the Temple Mount called the Chamber of Hewn Stone. We note from their question to the apostles—“By what power and by what name did you do this?”—that there was the belief that some form of power could reside in the name of a notable person. They are also asking by whose authority do they have the power to heal. Peter answers in verse 12 that not only power but salvation is found in the name of Jesus (Yeshua).

Before responding, Peter and John are filled with the Holy Spirit. The Messiah exhorts us not to worry about what we will say when we are indeed brought before rulers, for he promises that the Spirit will speak for us (Matt 10:19-20). Here we see a fulfilment of that promise. Also, we note that the disciples have received the Holy Spirit several times now (John 20, Acts 2). We learn that one of the actions of the Holy Spirit is to fill the believer multiple times, particularly at times of need. One can then have the Holy Spirit while also being filled with the Holy Spirit in the future. It does not appear to be a one-time event in the life of the believer.

Psalm 23. Known as the “shepherd psalm” for obvious reasons, this prayer of David reflects his experience of God in the context of the ancient world in which some cultures thought of gods as a divine shepherd.¹ David wrote of God as both a protector and provider who disciplines his

¹ Hammurabi, a king of the first Babylonian kingdom, was called a god and the good shepherd. Marc Van De Mieroop, *King Hammurabi of Babylon: A Biography*. 1st edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 127.

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beloved flock. Without the shepherd, the psalm implies, the sheep will face starvation and danger at the hands of predators.

One point to note is verse 5, in which God provides a table of food in the company of David's enemies. Hospitality and food was a point of honour in the ancient world, as it is in the modern Middle East to this day. Both Jews and Muslims trace the art of hospitality back to Abraham, who entertained God himself with hospitality and food. Meal occasions are powerful events where people who disagree can sit and eat together, fellowship and discuss and perchance see something in the other that they had not noticed before. Perhaps they may even rise from the table no longer as enemies but as friends. The Good Shepherd can arrange those events for us where an enemy can become a friend.

1 John 3:16-24. Not only are we made in the image of God, but one of the actions of the disciple is also to imitate God. As followers of Jesus, we are to love as Jesus has loved. In John's epistle that means a love that is self-sacrificial and, in the extreme circumstance, a love unto death. In Hebrew, there is a phrase, *Kiddush HaShaem*, which was used in antiquity of Jewish martyrs who died for their faith, notably against the Romans. In most cases of *Kiddush HaShem*—which means “sanctification of the Name” of God—the issue was preferring death instead of committing sin, such as blasphemy or being forced to murder. Jesus dies, not to defend his faith nor to avoid a fall into sin, but rather, dies as an act of divine love for the world. Love is not something that is simply felt in the emotional sense. Love is also demonstrated by action. John tells us to “not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (v. 18).

John 10:11-18. Shepherds at the time of Jesus ranked rather low on the social status spectrum. However, the ancient metaphor of the shepherd was thought of quite highly and was characteristic of leadership. All the patriarchs of the Jewish people were shepherds, from Abraham to David. There is something about shepherding that produces good biblical leaders. In one rabbinic midrash (Jewish story told to highlight a biblical truth) the question is asked, “When is Moses ready to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?” The answer is found in the rabbinic commentary *Shemot Rabbah 2* where Moses is shepherding the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro in Midian. One sheep wanders and gets lost, and Moses leaves the rest to follow and return the lost sheep. During this event, Moses encounters the burning bush as God has seen the compassion of Moses over the one lost sheep and knows his hero is ready to lead. The scene is actually included in the animated movie, the *Prince of Egypt*. Compassion and caring for others, particularly the lost, is a characteristic of biblical leadership. Good shepherds care for each and every member of the flock and not just the people that think theologically like them or share the same politics. We might sometimes think of sheep as being all the same, but they are not. Jesus knows his sheep, both as a community, the body of the Messiah, and as individuals. This relationship of “knowing” is reciprocal, in that Jesus knows his sheep and his sheep know him.

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The relationship is maintained not simply by grazing under the watchful eye of the shepherd but by the leading of his voice, his instructions and commandments. Our job is to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, both as a community and as individuals.

Another aspect of the messianic task is the bringing of the light to the Gentiles so that they too may worship the living God. The psalms proclaimed that the Gentiles will also one day worship the Lord (Psalm 117); the prophets declared that in the future the Gentiles will celebrate Sukkot in universal adoration of God (Zech 14), and Isaiah prophesied that the Sovereign Lord will gather not just the exile of Israel but others not of Israel (Isa 56:8). The agenda of God is to form the people of God and to live with them. This includes Gentiles. Jesus declares that this is part of his mission when he says, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen, I must bring them also.” There will be one flock and one shepherd. Some take this to mean ecclesiastical unity into one church and so resent denominations, however, the messianic point is that Jews and Gentiles will both accept the lordship of God and his Messiah.

ACNA Addendum

Ezekiel 34:1-10. Ezekiel presents a strong rebuke against the civil and religious leadership of the people of Israel. The shepherds of Israel, who in context are in Babylonian exile with their people, have acted inappropriately and have been self-serving. The leadership have been unfaithful in their mandate as leaders to care spiritually and physically for the people. When people live under unfaithful shepherds, the conclusion can quickly, but falsely, be reached that they don't need any shepherds at all. The result is that the flock scatters and becomes prey because “there was no shepherd.” This is not a good biblical situation to be in. We should take care not to confine this rebuke to the past and forget its lessons but should take this warning upon ourselves in the present day. Jesus has commanded us to “feed my sheep.” This is a command we ignore at both our own peril and the peril of the flock.

1 John 3:1-10. This Epistle reading was discussed in the Easter 3 notes for the Revised Common Lectionary. I draw your attention again to the declaration that we are “children of God.” This term formally referred to the people of Israel and described the intimate relationship that Israel has with God the Father. A major messianic task of the Good Shepherd is to draw the Gentiles into the flock of God, the Commonwealth of Israel. Jews and Gentiles can now both be called the “children of God” living under the protection and provision of the one Lord and shepherd. John urges the readers of his Epistle to now behave as members of one flock or community. Jews and Gentiles now have the same intimate relationship with the Lord of Heaven, and we should extend that relationship to each other in the form of brotherly love. Verse 10 concludes John's argument by saying that the evidence that we are the children of God is practicing righteousness and loving our neighbour.

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About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is the deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.