

# THE LAMB WILL BE THEIR SHEPHERD

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*JOHN 10:22-30; REVELATION 7:9-17*

*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*

*BY: RYAN DUECK*

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There is a famous saying often attributed to Swiss theologian Karl Barth who advised young pastors and theologians to always have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other and to be reading one in light of the other.

This is not to say that the Bible and the newspaper are to be given equal weight, but that we ought to read the news in light of the story of Scripture and that we ought to come to Scripture with the events of the world on our hearts and minds.

It has been quite a week.

No matter where we turned this week, there were reminders that we live in a world where all is not well.

The story that dominated the headlines was, of course, the bombing at the Boston Marathon on Monday and the all of the subsequent drama that unfolded as suspects were identified, pursued, killed, captured.

There was also the story of the fertilizer plant explosion in Texas only days later that killed fourteen people, and the attempted poisoning of various US political figures.

The same Monday, though, there was the usual violence around the world—31 killed and 200 injured in car bombings in Iraq...

Then there was yesterday's earthquake in China that killed 180 people.

And there is the ongoing desperate humanitarian crisis in Syria... where violence and deprivation are daily realities, and where nearly 4 million people have been displaced.

And the brutal persecution of Christians going on in the Central African Republic....

It has, for many, been a disorienting and destabilizing week full of reminders that our world is not a safe place.

Our Easter theme is “Witnessing God’s glory” but as I watched and read the news this week and thought about Barth’s quote that we need to read the newspaper alongside the Bible and allow Scripture to “read the world,” it was reinforced to me again that part of what it means to tell the story of the glory of the risen Christ is to simply name the obvious reality that it is a glory that shows up in the midst of trouble.

As followers of Jesus, we believe that the cross and the empty tomb are where God decisively won the victory over sin and death and evil, but we also know that this victory has not yet fully been implemented.

Our world still groans.

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So, how do we read our bibles in light of the groaning world that we have seen evidence of this week?

In this morning’s sermon, I want to talk about two passages of Scripture and then look at how these two passages tell us the truth in two areas.

1. The truth about God
2. The truth about human beings

The first text is from John’s gospel and tells the story of a confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders.

The leaders are quite blunt with Jesus: “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

They have seen Jesus’ miraculous signs, seen the stir he is causing in Jerusalem, and they want to hear it from his own mouth.

Jesus responds, as he so often does, a bit strangely. He appeals to the works that he has done, and he tells them that they do not believe because they are do not belong to his

sheep. “If you belonged, you would believe,” he says, “but you do not belong, so you do not believe.”

He concludes by saying “I and the Father are one”—at which point, the Jewish leaders are prepared to stone him for blasphemy, for claiming to be God (this comes in the passage immediately following the one we heard this morning.)

It’s interesting to note that this whole exchange takes place during the Feast of Dedication, otherwise known as Hanukkah. This is significant.

The Feast of Dedication originated in 164 BC as a way of honouring and remembering the exploits of Judas Maccabeus who liberated the Jewish temple from Greek occupation.

After Alexander the Great conquered much of the known world, Greek influence spread throughout the Mediterranean, including to the Jews and their temple.

The Jews were outraged at this and there were a number of resistances. Finally, Judas reclaimed the temple.

The temple, in the Jewish world, was both the place God dwelled and the location of religious power. It was the home of the “shepherds” of Israel—those who performed the sacrifices and guarded the law.

Here, in the temple, during a celebration set aside to honour the restoration of “business and religion as usual,” in Israel’s life, Jesus is indicting Israel’s shepherd’s as “false shepherds” and claiming that he and the father are the true shepherds of the sheep and that no one can snatch them out of their hand.

Throughout Israel’s Scriptures, there are references to false shepherds who fail to look after the sheep. Ezekiel 34 is perhaps the most famous example:

Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? 3 You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. 4 You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. 5 So they

were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. 6 My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them (Ezekiel 34:2-6).

Ezekiel 34 goes on to say that God himself will be the true shepherd of his people:

[T]hus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 12 As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep (Ezekiel 34:11-12).

In John 10, Jesus is saying, “I am the true shepherd” who has come to rescue his sheep from the false shepherds who do not have the interests of the sheep in mind.

Our second also talks about a shepherd.

We move from a confrontation in the Temple to an apocalyptic vision of the future.

We see a multi-ethnic multitude of people before the throne of the Lamb. We hear that they have emerged out of an ordeal, that they have been made clean and pure by the Lamb.

We hear the a similar promise to the one Jesus made to the Jewish leaders, that his sheep would be safe under his care, that “no one will snatch them out of my hand.”

The Lamb who is seated on the throne promises to “shelter them”:

- they will hunger and thirst no more
- the sun will not strike them

***The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd...*** guiding them to springs of water of life, and wiping every tear from their eyes.

It is one of these powerful biblical visions of the future—a vision that people of all times have desperately needed in the midst of violence and suffering and pain and death.

Both in John and in Revelation, though, we see something very important about *how* this future of peace is achieved.

In John, Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (John 10:11).

In Revelation, Jesus is described as the Lamb who is also the shepherd (Rev. 7:17).

The true Shepherd of Israel, the true Lord of history, the One who holds out the promise of a future of *shalom* is... a lamb.

Jesus is referred to in other ways, of course—the Lion of Judah, for example.

But this image of the “Good Shepherd” who is the rightful master of the sheep resounds in a unique way throughout Scripture.

And I think it is telling that when John sees a throne with all the nations before it, he sees not a Lion but a Lamb.

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I believe that wherever we turn in the Bible, we are presented with two truths. The truth about God and the truth about ourselves.

**First, the truth about us.**

What do these two texts tell us?

Well, first, and perhaps most obviously and least flatteringly, we are sheep.

We don't particularly like to think of ourselves as sheep, do we? It's not the most flattering of images.

If we're going to associate ourselves with animals, we prefer more noble and strong images.

Nations use images of eagles (USA) and bears (Russia) to connote strength and severity. Sports teams borrow images of animals that are fast and ferocious and intimidating (Sharks, Falcons, Predators, etc.).

But nobody wants to be a sheep.

Sheep are not very bright, not very attractive, and not very strong.

Claire just got her 4H sheep this week. Yesterday as I was writing, I asked her: Claire, describe what sheep are like for me. “They’re dumb,” she said. “They just follow each other around.”

We like to think of ourselves as independent and self-made and resourceful, but the truth is that we are all followers of *someone* or *something*, whether the latest political movement or TV personality or media craze—as was particularly evident in the reporting this week in Boston!

We are eager followers, even if we are often unaware of this.

We all *need* a shepherd, whether we realize it or not—someone to guide us through this unpredictable, disorienting world, someone to care for us, rebuke us, someone who knows us by name and has our best interests in mind, even when we don’t know what these are.

We *need* a shepherd because we are unable to secure for ourselves the things that matter most. We cannot solve our problems, we cannot root out sin and selfishness from the human heart that shows up in the events of our world. Much as we use the rhetoric of “making sure nothing like this will ever happen again,” we know that it will because the world is full of human beings.

We cannot save ourselves. We cannot heal our deepest wounds. We cannot prevent death and pain. We cannot guarantee the future.

We need a shepherd because without one, we easily get lost and we forget where our home is.

And then, the truth about God

He is the God of *all* his sheep... not just us!

Our passage in Revelation depicts an incredible scene—a great multitude from “every tribe and tongue” singing praise to the Lamb.

How desperately we need this vision in a world still fueled by racism and fear and hostility to those who “aren’t like us.” What a marvelous promise that God’s kingdom of peace will be so much stronger and more lasting than the rather limp attempts at “diversity” that we are familiar with today.

How incredibly reassuring to know that to God, all lives matter—whether they are American or Canadian or Chinese or Iraqi or Syrian or Colombian or Indian....

John 10:16 – “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”

The truth about God is that God isn’t nearly as biased and self-interested as we are (or as we often portray God to be!).

And of course, the truth about God is that the Good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

The shepherd *becomes* the lamb.

And the lamb who offers himself for the sin of the world, who absorbs all of the evil and pain of humanity, who conquers death by rising from the dead, *becomes* the Shepherd.

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Our theme this morning is “Witnessing the Glory of Love.”

There is no greater love than to lay one’s life down for one’s friends, Jesus tells his disciples (John 15:13).

So, knowing what we do about who we are and who God is, what are we to do?

The answer is both incredibly simple and incredibly profound.

We are to follow the Shepherd.

We are to love like Jesus loved, being willing to lay down our rights, our preferences, our security, our comfort, and, in extreme cases, even our *lives* for one another.

We are to proclaim the Good news about a Shepherd worth following.

And, we are to be willing to suffer, to serve and care for others as our Shepherd does.

From N.T. Wright's *How God Became King*:

The slaughtered and enthroned lamb of Revelation... is not only the shepherd of his people; he is also their template. Sharing his suffering is the way in which they are to extend his kingdom in the world. As I write this I am conscious that today's Western church, and I myself as part of it, have suffered remarkably little by comparison with Christians of other times and, today, other places. I honor those who are leading the way as today's kingdom-bringers and pray for them in their courage and steadfast witness.<sup>1</sup>

May God help us to hear the voice of our Shepherd and to follow him well.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 203.