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Our Saviour/St. Stephen's
Easter 4
April 30, 2023

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, the fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday.

And so, every year we have a reading that speaks about sheep and shepherds on this Sunday.

And, I find it rather fascinating that with respect to this analogy of sheep, and shepherds...

I find it fascinating that in the Gospel of John, Jesus is the sometimes referred to as the shepherd.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

He is the Good Shepherd because lays down his life for the sheep.

And I find it fascinating that in the Gospel of John, Jesus is sometimes referred to as a sheep.

He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

He is the Lamb of God that is sacrificed.

And I find it fascinating that in the Gospel of John, Jesus is sometimes referred to as the gate, as we hear in this story today.

Maybe the idea is that Jesus is all things to all people.

Nevertheless, I find it fascinating that Jesus is shepherd, and sheep, and gate.

And if we didn't know, with respect to today's passage, a shepherd of sheep was sometimes literally a gate.

The shepherd would in fact lie down in the entrance of a sheep pen, to serve as protector of the sheep, so as to ward off any intruders that would try to get into the pen to harm or steal any of the sheep.

So, that is what Jesus is likely referring to when he is saying “I am the gate.”

Another possible connection in this passage relates to the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem.

The Sheep Gate was where the sheep entered Jerusalem for sacrifice.

Sheep entered this gate and they would be sacrificed for the sin of the people.

And so when Jesus says he is the gate, he may be referring to himself as the portal by which men and women are forgiven their sins.

So, there are lots of allusions in John’s gospel to shepherds, and sheep, and gates.

PAUSE

But there is an overarching theme in John, whether we are talking about Jesus as the good shepherd, or Jesus as the lamb of God, or even Jesus as the gate.

There is an overarching theme in John, and that is this.

However, or by whatever image Jesus uses to speak of himself, he speaks of himself as the one who gives of himself to the people, as opposed to one who takes from the people.

Let me say that again, Jesus is the one who gives of himself to the people, as opposed to the one who takes from the people.

And that is a rather profound statement, at least it was for the people of Jesus’ day.

Now, the idea that Jesus, as God, is one who gives of himself as opposes to takes, is something we probably take for granted.

God gives to us as opposed to taking from us—okay, sure, we know that.

But for the people of Jesus’ day, this was a radical message. It represented a major shift in theological thought.

And this is something the New Testament, especially the Gospels, especially John...

This is something the Gospel writer John wants to make abundantly clear.

God gives to us as opposed to taking from us.

Why do I say this? Why does the Gospel writer John emphasize this? Why is this so important, so significant?

Why does this become something of a centerpiece of John's Gospel?

Well, it probably is because of the Temple. Because of the Temple in Jerusalem.

You see, the Temple in Jerusalem was everything to the Jewish people.

The Temple was the house of God, it was God's home here on earth.

Not that God didn't also abide in the heavens above.

Not that God didn't permeate all of creation.

But the Jewish people understood the Temple as a focal point, as a place to center their religious lives, even though Jews knew down in their hearts that God's beingness was larger than the Temple.

But, the Temple was everything to the Jewish people.

And it was thus, that the people through the works of the priests...

It was thus that the people of God, through the priests, served God.

And so, why did priests make sacrifices to God?

Because it was believed that God needed to be fed.

God needed food, like we need food.

And so the priests fed God food by burning animals on the altar.

The altar was the transport station, because what happens when you burn an animal sacrifice...the carcass gets smaller and smaller, while smoke rises up in the sky. Think of a barbecue we might have outside.

We cook our chicken, or burgers on the grill, and the smoke rises up.

Our ancestors did a similar thing on the altar, and the connection was made that the altar transported the animals up to God—the animal carcass shrank, slowly disappeared, as the smoke rose to God. And so, one could easily conclude that the sacrifice was being transported to God.

The ancients were feeding God when they made their sacrifices.

Which is why there are passages in scripture that say things like, “the aroma of the sacrifice was pleasing to God.”

And so the people of God, through the actions of the priests, served God.

PAUSE

Now it goes without saying, that other pagan cultures in ancient times had temples as well, and in those cultures, they would have actually have images of their gods in the temples, and those images would be dressed each day like we ourselves put on clothes each day. Again, the people were serving their gods.

But the Jews didn't do this because the commandments warned them not to make any images of God.

But nonetheless, the Jewish priests fed the Jewish God through sacrifices. And, the Jewish priests helped care for the house of God, namely the Temple, burning incense in the Temple, and so forth.

The priests were the custodians of God's house, not unlike a sort of present-day cleaning service.

So, in essence, the Jewish faith saw God as one who was served, as one who received from the people, as opposed to one who gave to the people.

Now, this is not entirely the case.

Of course, God was the one who blessed the people with a fruitful harvest.

God was the one who provided rain and provided the other necessities of life.

But much of what God bestowed upon the people was in response to the faithful service from the people toward God.

God truly was one who in many respects received and took from the people, as opposed to one who unconditionally gave to the people.

And so, yes, with the coming of Jesus onto the scene there is a radical shift in theology.

And indeed, John's gospel depicts Jesus himself as the new Temple.

In John 1:14 where it says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Obviously that is referring to Jesus, who is the Word.

But a better translation is, "The Word (that is, Jesus) became flesh, and TABERNACLED among us."

And the tabernacle, we may remember, was the movable tent that served as the makeshift temple for the Jewish people during the wilderness journey.

And then, of course, a little later, Jesus says in John 2:19, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Here, of course, Jesus is referring to his body. He is referring to himself as the new temple.

All this is by way of saying that there is a radical shift from the temple as the focal point where God's people serve God, to Jesus as the new temple, where in the person of Jesus, God serves God's people.

Matthew's Gospel says it best. There in Matthew 20:28 Jesus says, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve."

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But getting back to our topic today.

The references about the good shepherd, the sheep, and the gate, add another layer to this theme of God in Jesus Christ serving the people.

Again, Jesus is the good shepherd because lays down his life for the sheep.

Jesus is the Lamb of God, who dies so as to take away the sin of the world.

Jesus as the gate, is the portal through which God's people may be forgiven their sins.

These images are all about God serving God's people. It is all about God giving to God's people, giving of himself in his Son and dying for God's people, as opposed to taking from God's people.

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In seminary, we students learned an important lesson, pertinent to our discussion here...

There was an important lesson we learned in seminary that still sticks with me even today in my pastoral ministry.

We, future pastors, were told that we need to be careful never to allow our personal needs supersede that of the needs of those whom we serve in ministry.

Pastors need to be careful never to allow their personal needs supersede that of the needs of the people.

If they do, watch out.

Now, that doesn't mean that pastors shouldn't be properly compensated and properly cared for in their work.

But pastors should not abuse their authority such that their ministry becomes self-serving.

That was drilled into us as seminarians.

But, this is true of any profession, right? Teachers, politicians, police officers, counselors, you name it.

When trouble arises, it is usually because some person in their work has used their position in a self-serving manner.

This then is what the early church is getting at when the theological focus shifts from a God who is served by the people, to a God who serves the people.

And that theological shift reminds us then that there are really just two orientations for us in life.

Either we are focused inwardly, and it is all about us, our needs, our desires, our wants.

And there is Latin phrase for this first orientation—*incurvatus in se*. Curved in on one's self.

Such an orientation is described by Martin Luther who wrote these words:

“Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, being so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them..., or rather even uses god himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.”

And so, we are either focused inwardly, such that it is all about us, OR, we are focused outwardly toward God and our neighbor, which is the other orientation in life.

Obviously it is this second orientation towards which we are to aspire as God’s people.

It is the second orientation the early church emphasized in the description of Jesus in the Gospels, that orientation counter to earlier focus on the Temple of Jerusalem.

And so, it is worship, and prayer, and repentance, and generosity, and service, these things which orient us in the right way, away from the sinful self, which wants to consume everything for itself.

Even more simply put, we as God’s sheep, are to listen for the voice of our shepherd, and by hearing the voice of our shepherd, we turn away from the self-serving voice within.

Through worship and prayer, repentance and generosity, through service toward neighbor—in these things we hear the very voice of God, and we turn outward, orienting ourselves to receive God’s grace while at the same time giving God’s grace.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.