

Series: Witness of the Windows
Today: Strange Title for a King
Text: Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, November 20, 2011 (Christ the King Sunday)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

History of the Window

Today is the 11th window of the 12 windows in our building crafted by Louis Comfort Tiffany and Nicola D'Ascenzo. It is the last of the windows we will address in 2011, and we will complete our series on January 1, 2012 when we come back to the Magi Window.

Our window this morning is called *Jesus, the Good Shepherd Window*. It is one of the Tiffany windows and was presented to the church in 1920 by Sue Williamson in memory of her father, Henry F. Williamson, and her sister, Lillian Williamson Ghriskey. Mr. Williamson and his daughters were active members of this church in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and our booklet says they were prominent members of the Lancaster community, as well.

I attempted to find out more about the family without much success. So like you and me, this window is a testimony to the anonymous faithfulness of a family who love each other and loved Jesus Christ, and this church was the community of faith where they lived out their days.

The window portrays Jesus walking in green pastures and beside still waters with a shepherd's crook in his hand, so it could be associated with the familiar Psalm 23. So before we read our gospel lesson, I would like to invite those of you who can remember the 23rd Psalm to recite it with me from memory: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....*

Christ the King Sunday

If you came to celebrate Thanksgiving today, I am afraid you will be disappointed. In the liturgical year today is Christ the King Sunday. Christ the King Sunday is the final Sunday in the Christian year. Next Sunday we will begin the season of Advent and we will begin to tell the story of God's saving love in Jesus Christ all over beginning with the birth of Jesus and ending with his death and resurrection. It is a story we tell ourselves every year, from beginning to end, for two reasons: 1) we human beings seem to have amazingly good "forgetters" installed in our brains, and we need to be reminded of the details of that story and what it means to our lives. 2) There are those who have joined us since this time last year who have never received that story with believing ears.

So every year we tell the story of the Word of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us from its beginning (the birth) to its end (his death and resurrection). For the rest of the year we focus on what it means for us to live out the love of God in Jesus Christ as the Church, and when we come to the end, we celebrate the power of God over all things on Christ the King Sunday, and then we start all over again.

Christ the King Sunday is the end of the story. It is the day when we acknowledge that the rule of God in the lives of those who follow Christ is stronger than our allegiance to any nation; stronger than our allegiance to any person, stronger than our ties to any organization; even stronger than any ties to our families of origin. In the words of George Frederick Handel, we say that Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and that he alone is worthy of our worship, honor and praise.

However, Jesus was never comfortable with the title of King while he lived his life on this earth. Instead, in our text for this morning he identifies not with the King, but with the shepherd. Just as David was anointed King from Jesse's family, Jesus gives us the shepherd image for the kind of leader he promises to be. Listen to the Word of God in John 10:11-18:

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

The Message

When Jesus first spoke the words of our lesson for the morning, it caused quite a stir. They are part of what are known as the “I AM” passages in the Gospel of John, and they posed a problem for the religious leaders of his day. In this passage, God as a Shepherd was a familiar concept in Judaism, but when Jesus identifies himself as the “Good Shepherd,” in search of sheep who are not in the fold, it was viewed by the Jewish establishment as a direct attack on their unique relationship between God and God’s chosen people. These were not comforting words for the devout Jew. It makes room for all of us, not just the chosen few.

On this Christ the King Sunday, it shows us the kind leadership Jesus was willing to offer. It reminds us that the good shepherd style of leadership is: *Sacrificial, Relational, and Purposeful.*

SACRIFICIAL

A colleague in Illinois tells about the time he sought a real shepherd’s staff to replace the bent, thin electrical conduit replica that was used in his church’s Christmas procession. He asked an expert Illinois sheep man where he might find one and the sheep man told him that he probably wouldn’t be able to find what he was looking for. He told my colleague, “*You must remember that the sheep in the Middle East are used to being led. Here in the west they are driven.*”

Isn't that a parable for our times? We live in a time when people feel driven rather than led. We are driven to succeed; driven to produce. Gone are the images of the corporate leader who cares about his/her employees. Success is measured by the ability to make a profit even if it means ruthless downsizing and questionable ethics. I think that is why we have so much frustration in our country now. The "Occupy" movement here in Lancaster and throughout the United States is a push back to the Tea Party movement of 2010. Both movements are asking questions of trust; can we trust the people who are responsible to lead us? The answers from both movements is no, and we are a country adrift in a sea of voices without the kind of leadership we need for such a time as this. What makes it even worse is that our leaders are not getting the message of how dissatisfied we are.

I am not a businessperson, and I wouldn't pretend to be one, but I can lift up the image of the good shepherd contained in these texts. As Patrick Miller points out in his exposition of Psalm 23, the good shepherd is actively engaged in the welfare of his sheep. He is guiding, seeking, comforting, protecting. The good shepherd in John 10 is one who is even willing to lay down his life for the good of the flock.

On December 11, 1995 Malden Mills, the makers of Polartec burned to the ground. Do you remember that story? Aaron Feuerstein, the owner of that business was not a Christian, but a devout Orthodox Jew. However, he practiced good shepherd leadership. Feuerstein explained that he drew on Jewish tradition when faced with the crisis: "When all is moral chaos, this is the time for you to be a mensch," the Yiddish word for an honorable, decent, compassionate person who embodies justice and strives for righteousness.

He paid his employees full wages through the holidays, and he vowed to rebuild his business so that his employees could return to their jobs. He was 74 years old; old enough to retire on the insurance

money, and who would have blamed him. Why didn't he just take the money and quit while he was ahead? Because that's not the kind of leader he was.

I wish the story had a happy ending, but it does not. No one ever said that being faithful always leads to being fruitful. He rebuilt the company, and rehired his employees, but his personal sacrifice caused him to file for bankruptcy and sell the company to a competitor. His only reward was that he did the right thing, even though it was a sacrifice. He was a good shepherd in the face of personal disaster.

RELATIONAL

The Good Shepherd style of leadership is also relational. The sheep know they are safe because they know the shepherd. They follow the sound of his voice because they know he has their best interests at heart. They trust him and will do anything for him because he has proven himself to be worthy of that trust.

In reflecting on these verses, William Willimon tells the story of a man who was known to everyone as a mean old man. He was resentful and bitter, and there were those who said he had good reason. His wife had died giving birth to their only child. The child died shortly after his mother from complications. Some said he has reason to be bitter.

The man never went to church. He never had anything to do with anyone. When he reached his late sixties, they carried him out of his apartment and over to the hospital to die. No one visited. No flowers were sent. He went there to die alone.

However there was a student nurse who was in training, and because she was in training, she didn't know everything they teach you in school about the necessity for detachment and the need to keep professional distance from her patients. She befriended the old man. It had been so long since he had a friend that he didn't know how to act with one. When she tried to help, he would growl, "Go away and leave me alone!"

She would just smile at him and try to coax him to eat his Jell-O. At night she would tuck him in, and he would growl, "Don't need nobody to help me."

Soon he grew so weak that he did not have the strength to resist her kindness. Late a night, after her duties were done, she would pull up a chair and sit beside his bed and sing to him as she held his old gnarled hand. He looked up at her in the dim lamp and wondered if he saw the face of the little one whom he never got to see as an adult. A tear formed in his eye when she kissed him good night, and for the first time in forty, maybe fifty years he said, "God bless you!"

Willimon concludes the story by saying that as she left the room, two others remained unseen by the human eye. And in unison they whispered in the old man's ear the last word he heard before slipping into the valley of the shadow of death. What was the word? "*GOTCHA!*"

PURPOSEFUL

Finally, there is a reason for the good shepherd style of leadership. It is to keep the flock together. An shepherd knows there is safety in the fold. During the day the flock was scattered over wide areas, but at night the shepherd would herd them into a fold; a walled enclosure where he would take them at night to protect them from the dangers of wild animals. The good shepherd always led his sheep to a safe place where they could be together to ward off the dangers of the night.

One of my favorite books from college days is *Men Against the Sea*. It is the story of Captain Bligh and 18 English sailors who were cast adrift from their ship after the famous mutiny in the south seas. The book is based on a log kept by Captain Bligh; a factual account of their 3600 mile voyage in an open boat; one of the greatest feats of courage and endurance ever recorded.

Captain Bligh wasn't the most lovable of sea captains. In fact, he was a cruel despot who drove his men to mutiny. However, once those who remained faithful to him were cast adrift in the open sea, something changed for the better in Captain Bligh. He became a leader, and his leadership was the only

thing which saved him and his men. Without guns, with only a small amount of food and drink, Bligh rallied the men to work together to save themselves.

Steering by dead reckoning, cheering on his weak and storm soaked men, keeping the strongest constantly bailing the over loaded boat, Captain Bligh never for a moment relaxed his determination to reach the East Indies.

Forty seven days after the mutiny he brought his half dead crew of 17 (only one died on the voyage) to anchor at the Dutch colony of Timor. 3,600 miles in an open boat, and it only came about because of one man's determination that all of them would make it or none of them would make it. He redeemed himself in history because he found a purpose in his leadership: to save his men. And to a man those men said they would not have made it without their captain.

Conclusion

This is the kind of King we worship on Christ the King Sunday. His leadership is sacrificial. It is relational, and it is purposeful. It is the kind of leadership Jesus offers, if we are willing to follow him.

Amen.