

“The Lamb at the Center of the Throne”

Psalm 23; John 10:22-30; Revelation 7:9-17

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

May 8, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Easter

I want to begin this morning by drawing your attention to this painting. This is called “The Good Shepherd” and it is the work of a nineteenth-century painter whose name was Bernhard Plockhorst. It is one of a number of paintings Plockhorst created based on biblical themes; this one, obviously, is based on the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, from the Gospel according to John. If you are thinking the painting looks somewhat familiar, well, it is; look at the stained glass window on the east wall of the sanctuary. That window was inspired by Plockhorst’s painting. Apparently, Plockhorst’s painting was so popular about 125 years ago that it became the basis of stained glass windows in *many* churches around the country. Here’s the original painting, and our stained glass window, side by side. Over in the Memorial Room we have an article from the *Ingham County News* in 1901 describing various features of our church building, and it mentions that that window was based on Plockhorst’s painting.

The reason why I’m highlighting this painting today is because this Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is what is called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” Churches that follow the three-year lectionary read Psalm 23 and a New Testament lesson and a reading from the Gospel according to John that all draw on the “Good Shepherd” theme, on the fourth Sunday of Easter, year after year. You may have noticed quite a bit of music in today’s service playing off the “Good Shepherd” theme. There’s a reason for that!

Psalm 23 is, of course, the most familiar psalm to most Christians; it has won the appreciation of countless Christians through the centuries. “The Lord is my shepherd;” those are very familiar words, that can be interpreted to be referring either to God the Father Almighty, or to Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. Both interpretations are perfectly valid. If you look carefully at Psalm 23 – the text of it is in your bulletin – you will note that the first half of the Psalm talks *about* the Shepherd, and the second half is addressed *to* the Shepherd. The Psalm moves from talking about the Shepherd in the *third* person, to talking to the Shepherd in the *second* person. It is a very personal psalm, one that can be used in a wide variety of different settings and circumstances, from birth to death and everywhere in between. Some people see references to both of the Sacraments of the church in this Psalm: “he leads me beside the still waters” could be a reference to the Sacrament of baptism; “you prepare a table before me” could be a reference to the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. It’s a psalm to be read again and again, and treasured, and committed to memory, if you haven’t already. It can be a source of great comfort to have the words of a psalm like this, or some hymns that you love, ready in your heart and on your lips, when you are going through any kind of medical procedure, or difficult crisis, or whatever.

Let us turn now to the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John. In this passage Jesus is engaged in

some dialogue with his opponents. He says to them: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.” These verses are simple and straightforward; they do not require a degree in theology to figure out. He’s talking about his followers, the church, people like us. He is the Shepherd; we are the sheep: people who intentionally gather to *hear his voice*, to listen to his holy Word. People who try to *follow him*, not just doing whatever they *feel* like, but actively trying to discern what *God* wants us to be doing. One of the precious gifts we receive for our faithful following is the gift of *eternal life*; the comfort and the hope that comes from knowing that when our life on this earth comes to an end, there is a life in the heavenly realm that awaits. These verses are just a portion of a longer section about Jesus as the Good Shepherd in the tenth chapter of John; you are welcome to do some additional reading on your own.

Today’s reading from the book of Revelation also ties into the Shepherd theme ... after a fashion. It’s a more complicated reading, which should come as no surprise. It does come from the book of Revelation, after all. The passage depicts a scene in the heavenly realm, in the throne room, so to speak, of God Almighty. “After this I looked,” wrote John, “and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

There are a couple things to note here. First is the simple fact that Jesus shows up in this passage as a *lamb* and not as a *shepherd*. Shepherds, of course, take care of sheep, and young sheep are called lambs. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus is *also* the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. If you look back at Plockhorst’s painting, you will see Jesus holding a lamb in his hands. I don’t see any other lambs in that painting – just a whole lot of sheep – so you could make the case that that little lamb represents Jesus *just as much* as the shepherd does. It might represent us too, of course. But we should always remember that Jesus is *both* a Shepherd and a Lamb. He is the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus *is also* the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. *Both* statements are true. Scripture gives us two related metaphors, similar but different. *Both* are true.

The second thing that we need to note here in these verses from this heavenly throne room is the vast array of *people* who are present. “A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” A *great multitude that no one could count*. Some Christians through the centuries have thought that only 144,000 people will be saved. There’s a biblical basis for that notion, although the people espousing that view have missed a critical detail. The Book of Revelation, just before the passage we are looking at today, gives us an image of 144,000 people who have been “sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel,” twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes. That represents (perhaps symbolically) the remnant of the Jewish people who come to faith in Jesus Christ. It does *not* represent the totality of all the Christians who will make their home in heaven with God. That number is not given in the Bible, and what we read here in this passage suggests that it is a *very* large number, much, *much* greater than the 144,000 people from the twelve tribes of Israel. “A great multitude that *no one could count*” is what scripture says. The number of people who will be saved is, ultimately, known only to God.

But not only are there an *incredibly large number* of Christians here in John’s vision of heaven, they are also an *incredibly diverse* lot. Read it again. “A great multitude that no one could count, *from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.*” Right now, there are 195 countries in the

world that are recognized by the United Nations and by our own State Department, plus a number of others whose status is disputed, like Taiwan and Kosovo. That's just the world *today*; there are also many nations and empires that *used* to exist but do not exist any longer, and who knows how many countries that will come to exist in the future. John's vision of heaven includes people from *every nation* on earth – past, present, and future. “From all tribes and peoples and languages” – that means every ethnic group is represented, every majority and minority group everywhere – past, present, and future. Counting tribes and people groups is a little challenging, but some Christian groups have managed to count about 17,000 different people groups around the world. Again, that number doesn't include people groups that used to exist but don't any more, or people groups that might come to exist in the future. As for languages, well, right now, there are more than 7,000 different languages spoken around the globe. How many languages have died out over the centuries? Might some new languages evolve in the future? John's vision of the heavenly throne room includes people who speak *every language under the sun*. “A great multitude that no one could count, from *every nation*, from *all tribes and peoples and languages*.” An *incredibly* diverse assortment of people. When you get to heaven, gathered around that throne, you might find people on your right and left from diverse corners of the world. Christians from Brazil, from Mexico, from the Philippines, from Nigeria, from China, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, from Germany, from Ethiopia, from the Vatican City, from India, from Korea, from the West Bank. Christians from Ukraine; Christians from Russia. And those are just Christians in the *present*. There would also be Christians from the ancient Roman Empire, from St. Patrick's mission to Ireland in fifth century, from the Spanish missions to the indigenous tribes in the New World in the 1500s, from the Russian missions to the native tribes in Alaska in the late 1800s – just to name a few. All of this to say: when you get to heaven, *don't expect everybody to look or talk like you*. Christianity is a *global* religion. Those of us in the United States represent only about 11% of the current global total – and, starting about 40 years ago, more Christians live in the *southern* hemisphere than the *northern*.

But all these people – this *incredibly diverse assortment* of people – are all doing *the same thing* in this vision of heaven: they are all “standing before the throne and before the Lamb,” singing their praises to God and to the Lamb. One of the elders in the heavenly throne room explains the vision to John: “They are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” What did the elder say about the what the Lamb is doing? Hear it again. “The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd.” Imagine. Jesus is our Good Shepherd *now*. But what this vision tells us is that Jesus will *continue* to be our Good Shepherd when we get to heaven. “He will guide them to springs of the water of life.” The Good Shepherd is *still* tending to the needs of the flock ... even after they have all died, even after they've come to their new homes in the heavenly realm!

Make sure you grasp the weight of this: Jesus is the Good Shepherd *here and now* – and also *eternally*. He is the one calling us to follow him now, guiding us, leading us to safe pastures and still waters, defending us from the ravenous wolves that want to devour us. He's doing that for us *now*. But he's not going to stop doing it when we die. He will *still* be our Shepherd when we reach the other side. He will *never* leave you or abandon you. He is the Good Shepherd, *your* Good Shepherd, now and eternally; today, tomorrow, and *forever*. He will *never stop taking care of you*. Thanks be to God!

© 2022 Rev. Bill Pinches