

Reflections for *Lent at a Distance*

Sunday, March 22, 2020

We are living, as many generations have said, in interesting times. Most of us cannot remember a time when we could not gather for worship by the edict of a government. And yet, here we are.

But this, like all other times, is temporary. How temporary, we cannot say, since we are in the midst of it. But when we look back in days to come, we will realize how temporary it really is.

As we begin our “worship at a distance”, I would like to have us sing/read the hymn, *O God Our Help In Ages Past* (to sing along, here is a link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-hN740J6qA>).

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.

Under the shadow of Thy throne Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone, and our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God, to endless years the same.

A thousand ages in Thy sight are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home.

Words: Isaac Watts, 1719

Music: William Croft, 1678 - 1727

Our current distress, is really quite minimal. Yes, there is the possibility of a novel virus, but humanity has experienced that before...Ebola, Dengue fever, small pox, to name a few. And whether God's people succumbed to any of them, they were never outside of his tender hand.

In cleaning out a corner of my study this week, I discovered a newsletter from Sergey Rybikov, the then president of Donetsk Christian University, written in 2009. At that time there were troubles in the country, and here is part of what Sergey wrote:

It is vital that we all continue grow in our personal relationship with God , striving to understand his word and his promises to us. We are not our own, but we are God's children (Romans 8.16). God is fighting for us, so who can be against us? (Romans 8.31) In God's strength, we can all overcome and find security in him.

We should pay special attention to our holiness, keeping ourselves from sin (James 1.27) and being holy in all we do (1 Peter 1.15). In difficult situations, we need to be very careful not to turn away from God. Attempting solve our problems apart from God can lead to dishonesty, trickery and impure motives. This path leads only to sin and not to real solutions.

He has four other points that I will share in the coming weeks. For now, let us turn to the meditation for the morning.

The Good Shepherd for Those Who Are “Sheepish”

... I am the good Shepherd. John 10.11

There is a great advantage to studying the Bible in a systematic, consecutive order. You get to see how things connect. Having thought a bit about the healing that followed Jesus' pronouncement that he is the light of the world last week, we will continue as John does in his narrative.

Thus our scripture reading is John 9.40 – 10.23:

9.40 Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, "Are we also blind?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains.

10.1 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. 11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may 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 I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."

¹⁹There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. ²⁰Many of them said, "He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?" ²¹Others said, "These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

²²At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon.

You may have noticed that I started the reading in chapter 9, and broke off before finishing chapter 10. Keep in mind that neither chapter, nor verse divisions were part of the text as John wrote it—they were added later, theoretically for our ease of reading. The problem is that sometimes we forget how connected one event is to another when there is a chapter break.

These events, though on the way to the cross, do not occur close to passion week. John's including the time frame (10.22) tells us that. It also helps explain why Jesus says what he does about hired hands, thieves and robbers who came before him.

The Feast of Dedication is also known as the Festival of Light, or Chanukah. This is the celebration of the victory of God's people over the Syrian Greeks about 200 years before as they were led by a family of priest known as the Maccabees.

What this family did was good and righteous. What followed for several generations, was not. The descendants of the Maccabees were later known as the Hasmoneans, and they declared themselves to be king-priests of the nation. Unlike their Maccabean forefathers, they fell into the corruption of much earlier times, and misled many.

It is not difficult to understand that Jesus may well have had this family of king-priests in mind when he referred to those who came before in the earthly kingdom as being thieves and robbers.

Many rulers in the past, both royalty and priestly, were corrupt to the point of stealing from the people, oppressing the poor, not enforcing God's law of Jubilee. So when Jesus speaks about the thieves and robbers who have come before, it's not just in recent history, it goes way back.

There is certainly historical foundation for what Jesus says about who he is in contrast to those who have come before. But I think that Jesus is referencing something else as well.

In Ezekiel 34, God confronts the "shepherds" of Israel who have fed themselves on the flock of God, but do not feed the sheep. They take, but they do not care for, do not protect, do not strengthen, do not heal, do not gather in. They only deal harshly with those in their charge.

And then he makes an astounding promise: He—God himself—will shepherd his flock, his people.

¹¹For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹²As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue

them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

What a wonderful promise God made to the people of the Exile in Babylon. He will seek them out, gather them up, bring them home and shepherd them himself.

But realize that The LORD does not stop there—he describes a wonderful future Shepherd who will care for them:

²³And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

David his servant. Who by this time has been dead for several hundred years. How can this be? Because The “David” of Ezekiel 34 is great David’s greater Son, the long anticipated Messiah.

Jesus’ words to the Pharisees (this conversation is a continuation of the one begun at the end of chapter 9) in John 10 are not merely given to point out the corruption of the past, nor even that Jesus is a good shepherd that will do a better job if he is just given the opportunity.

Jesus is telling the Pharisees, and the disciples who are listening in, that he himself is THE good Shepherd. Not one of many, not a good one in comparison to many bad ones, but the long anticipated good Shepherd.

How long was this Shepherd anticipated? At least as far back as David himself: *The LORD is my shepherd....* All that is described in that psalm is applied to Jesus himself.

Jesus has just made a proclamation that the Pharisees understood all too well: he has claimed to be God in flesh. Perhaps a modern reader might not catch that on the first reading, but upon reflection, that is exact what he has said.

But Jesus does not stop with that proclamation. He then states that he will lay down his life for his sheep (v. 15), and will take it up again (v. 17), by the authority of his heavenly Father (v. 18).

Imagine what that must have meant to the two different audiences present—the Pharisees, and the disciples. For the disciples it meant good news—the Shepherd was with them, would give his life for them, would rise from the dead for them, place them in the palm of his hand and not let them go (v. 28).

For the Pharisees, it was bad news. It meant that Jesus was either who he said he was, and they were in trouble because of their sinful rebellion, he was just another blasphemer worthy of death, or simply a crazy person.

A tough determination for them to make. He is either a liar, a lunatic, or the LORD of all.

Verses 19 through 21 seem to have them rule out the lunatic option, because of the miracles. And, if they really think about it, they will have to rule out the liar option also, again because of the miracles that demonstrate his mastery over creation. But they choose to hold onto the blasphemer option because the reality of who Jesus really is proves to be too much for them.

Let me ask you: If you were in that crowd that day in December, which side would you be on? The Pharisees, who choose to not admit the truth of what they have seen and heard, or the disciples, who in spite of the challenges to previous experience, still know Jesus as The Good Shepherd, the Christ, the Son of the living God.

One part of the crowd denies, and dies. Lost.

The other trusts, and lives, securely in the palm of the Savior's hand, in spite of all the turmoil that goes on around them.

*O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our maker!
For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand.*
(Psalm 95.6-7)

This is not the time to be a self-righteous Pharisee. It is the time to be the sheep, in spite of it all, and in the midst of troubles.

What better place to be than in his hand?

What better hope is there, than to dwell in the house of the LORD forever?

Whose better to be, than the sheep of The Good Shepherd?

I suggest two hymns for our closing reflection.

First, *The Lord's My Shepherd*, using the *Brother James' Air* tune (here are a couple of links: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6R_FvWApBw; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKpMeKUKo3M>)

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want; he makes me down to lie
in pastures green; he leadeth me the quiet waters by.

My soul he doth restore again, and me to walk doth make
within the paths of righteousness, e'en for his own name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale, yet will I fear none ill,
for thou art with me; and thy rod and staff me comfort still.

My table thou hast furnished in presence of my foes;
my head thou dost with oil anoint, and my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my life shall surely follow me;
and in God's house forevermore my dwelling place shall be.

Words: Psalm 23, *Scottish Psalter*, 1650

Music: **Brother James' Air**, J.L. Macbeth Bain, 1840 – 1925

The second hymn you may not know, but it is fairly easy to learn, and the words are very fitting for our time, even if you just listen for today: *He Will Hold Me Fast* (here is the link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsA_UPXnlw)

When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast;
When the tempter would prevail, He will hold me fast.
I could never keep my hold through life's fearful path;
For my love is often cold; He must hold me fast.

*He will hold me fast, He will hold me fast;
For my Savior loves me so, He will hold me fast.*

Those He saves are His delight, Christ will hold me fast;
Precious in His holy sight, He will hold me fast.
He'll not let my soul be lost; His promises shall last;
Bought by Him at such a cost, He will hold me fast.

For my life He bled and died, Christ will hold me fast;
Justice has been satisfied; He will hold me fast.
Raised with Him to endless life, He will hold me fast
'Till our faith is turned to sight When He comes at last!

Words: verses 1-2 Ada Habershon (1861-1918)

verse 3 & music, Matthew Merker, 2013