Hearing the Shepard Among the Wolves

 If you searched though the whole bible, I don’t think you could find a gospel lesson that I would not like to preach on more then the Gospel lesson today. For those of you who don’t know, I resigned where I was the pastor at before, because I came back from a sabbatical, looked around, and it was very clear that I needed to leave.. And it is precisely this verse that we read as our Gospel that is so often held over the head and the conscience of pastors to stick it out and never abandon the sheep. Basically I don’t want to preach on it because from where I am in my life, this is the text that can most easily be used, to deepen the pain that I feel. When we are in the place of such suffering, a text like this can go two ways, it can be used to trap us into a path of pain and destruction or it can be a text that points us to a path that can lead one back into the abundance of life. What do we do?

 And I am not alone in having texts of scriptures that are painful. For you as a congregation perhaps it is this text that hurts, after all I understand that you had as pastor that seemed to leave far to soon and perhaps you felt abandoned. Also, as individuals, what are the texts that hurt? For those of you who have had a loved one die, who have prayed and prayed for their healing and yet it never came. What is it like for you when we read stories about miraculous healings. Most people struggle with some part of our sexuality, what is it like when we hear what ever verse it is that seems to condemn us for our particular struggle. Or take our reading form the epistle of John, when it states “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” If we dare to listen to this verse, really listen, it will hurt probably most people here. If we honestly listen to scripture and read it, we will find verses that hurt, that seem to condemn us, or pin us down, and that threaten to lead us deeper into our pain. But, is there also life in these verses? What do we do?

 There are several responses. The most popular is simply to ignore these verses. It is easy to simply skip over, play down and ignore the parts that we don’t like, the parts that make uncomfortable. We all do this. I know I was originally planning preaching on the epistele. How about you, how many of you ready the bible daily, systematically going through it? IF not why not? What are you avoiding? When you do read it, pay attention, what parts do you skip over, or treat as unimportant? Almost everyone cuts and pastes scripture, our lectionary is amazing for this. What we end up with is bible that is like a child’s craft where you fold paper, and cut out figurines, it might be prettier, it might look more like us but it hard to really understand the text left over.

 The other option of course is what is also quite popular, which is to turn the bible into a legalistic club. To either beat our selves or others down with it. I am sure you have all had experience with this, as both the wielder or the recipient of the blows. Now for how many of you was that life giving? Is this the path to life?

There must be another way. And there is. Why do text hurt us, it is because life hurts us. The gift of scripture is that it gives us a way of working with that hurt, to discover life. Where ever we encounter, pain, questions or tension in scripture, those are probably both the places where life has hurt us and the places where God is calling us into new life. Birth is painful. To enter new life we need to begin, by daring to enter our pain and seek its message for us. We must dare to walk between avoiding and turning to simplistic legalism. **Instead we need to enter the tension both within the text and between the text and us.**

 So what is the tension in this text? When we read this scriptures about the good shepherd or Psalm 23, we often picture this as a comforting and pastoral image, but what we are missing is just how much tension there are in these texts. After all in our Gospel there are wolves, trying to eat the sheep. The image we need in our mind is not of a shepherd on lush rolling hills, but rather the Judean wilderness. This is a land of steep cliffs and narrow, bending valleys. It is the perfect places for bandits and thieves to wait in ambush. It is a place where in ancient times lions, wolves, bears and wild dogs would prey on sheep and shephards alike. Water and food is scarce and fleeting. There was a good reason why David was so good with a slingshot. Being a shepherd was to be surrounded by danger

 This tension is reflected in the context of this text. A text without context is usually just a pretext. The story that leads into this dialogue is the story of a man, born blind that Jesus heals, and in response religious leaders act like so many religious people do when they encounter God’s power, they respond with fear. This man’s own parents try to have nothing to do with him now that he is healed, he is thrown out of the synagogue and thus also their community. And it is in the midst of this tension between healing and rejection that Jesus restores not just his physical, but also his spiritual sight. Then after todays Gospel, the religious leaders ask Jesus to tell them if he is the Messiah. Jesus basically says look at my works, and their response is to want to stone him.

 The tension in this text is that when there is spiritual healing, spiritual sight, God’s presence and work –there is also the treat of wolves and thiefs that will try to kill off this new life. Why do we need a good shepherd, it is because there are wolves. When we begin to be healed, when we gain spiritual sight, when Christ becomes present - in our life and our community, out come the wolves. And the wolves scare us, they hurt us, they kill us, They are real threats, they are the reality both within us and in our community theatens to kill of the life God has given you. If there are parts of scripture that hurt, I would bet that it is because at some point in your life you have been bitten.

So the tension, that I hear in this text, is between Christ’s presence, Christ’s healing and giving sight, and the forces within us and among that works to kill this new life off.

 So, After delving into the tension in the text, we must ask, how is this our story. What story are you living out in your life? What part of this story is your story? This is a question that is worth sitting with for a while. Often we rush and think that we are one character, especially when a text hurts, but perhaps we need to listen again, and play, with the text and see what it is like to see it from different perspectives. What is it like to be a hired hand? Why would you flee? What is it like to be a good shepherd, a wolf and a sheep? Each character each give us a chance to explore different part of our soul and to listen for who we are. As you do this, you will begin to discover how a text can expand our vision. As our vision expands we create the space in our heart to hear the Holy Spirit Speaking.

 I have found, is that this question of who are we in this story, or what story of scripture are we living out to be one of the most powerful question we can ask. What I have been learning is that the bible is not some historical book, or some infallible paper god, it is rather a profound story that allows us to read the story of our soul.

As I struggled with this text, It is easy to feel the condemnation of the hired hands, but can we sympathize with their fear? Those wolves and thieves why are they so hungry, so desperate. Is it greed or is it hunger that drives them? Can I have empathy for them? As for the sheep, as I imagined being a sheep, there was great releaf. It is so good to not have the burdern of being the Shepard to be looked after fed and proeted by this good shepherd. Yes, even pastors get to be sheep. Guided, protected and fed by God. And this good shepherd? Something struck me as I imagined my self the good shepherd, it is the phrase, I am the good shepherd, the “I am” is one way of expressing the name of God. What is it like to simply allow God to be the Good shepherd? This phrase “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. [[1]](#footnote-1) Is one of the many times that John expresses how we are invited into the life of God through Jesus. What does it feel like to allow Jesus to shepherd through us. As we imagine who we are in the text, this imagination expands our soul and perspective, it opens our hearts. Once our hearts are open, once our vision is expanded we can ask a new question.

In John 10:10 it Jesus states - 10**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.** [[2]](#footnote-2) Once we have delved into the tension, once we have explored who we are, we must also ask this, how is this text calling me into life abundantly. After all this is why Jesus, the Word has come.

 Is the path of life compassion? To have compassion and empathy for the wolves and theif and perhaps wonder if there is another way of feeding them? Is the path of life to feel the fear of sheep who are abandoned by hired wokers, while at the same time feeling empathy for the workers who out of fear ran away? When I read this story, I heard the call to life in the phrase**, I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.[[3]](#footnote-3) . . . and “they will listen to my voice”** For if I am a sheep, if you are a sheep, is this what matters, is this the path of life? Not some outside expectation but rather listening to the voice of Christ and being protected by a good shepherd? Is the path of life being known by and knowing God. Of course in the bible this language of knowing is a language of intimacy. How does a sheep get to know a shepherd voice, it is because the sheep spends time with the shepard, it is because the shepherd has cared for them, fed them, lived with them guided them.

 A person that I once knew told me about her sister who had sheep. And it was true she would call, and out would come all the sheep. Now if her husband came out called, the sheep would just wander around, going about their business. Why would they follow her and not him? It was because she was the one who was there when they were born, who each day made sure they were fed, protected and watered. They knew her and she knew them, because she cared for them.

 Perhaps this is the path to abundant life that these texts give. There is a tension in all of our lives. There are wolves, driven by hunger, thieves driven by greed. There are workers driven away by fear. This is a part of our world and a part of each of us. There is also a good shepherd, a God of abundant love who is there to make sure that we are not consumed or stolen away. There is a good shepherd of love, who is there when we are born, who feeds us, heals us, and leads us to life giving water. Can we hear, and follow this good shephareds voice? Can we hear the voice of love? Even in texts that hurt?

 Why are there texts that hurt us? It is because life hurts us. In the bible and in life there are wolves and thieves. The art of life, the art that this text, that this reading of scripture teaches us, is to enter into the tension, to expand our spirit, to clense our heart by taking the view of others, so that we can listen in the midst of it for the voice of the good shepherd, who calls out to all of us, in order to protect us, to call us away from wolves, and beside still waters. In the midst of life’s threats, can you hear the call into the abundance of life.

1. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 10:14–15). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 10:10). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 10:14–15). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)