

P8B 2021 Mark 6:30-34, 53-56, Psalm 23

For a carpenter who hung out with fisherman, Jesus talked a lot about sheep and shepherds. Besides funerals, when we almost always read Psalm 23, this psalm and the gospel passages that portray Jesus as a shepherd recur in our appointed lectionary readings a number of times throughout the year. Since each liturgical season is different, the emphasis of the metaphor is a little different. We get Good Shepherd Sunday in the Easter season, whereas we might consider today Bad Shepherd Sunday. This is another place where the good news can most easily be found in the promise that the Kingdom of God is *not* like the kingdoms of humankind.

Psalm 23 was part of the bible study curriculum at camp this year. I had 16 junior high students and their three counselors, and between the 20 of us I think we had about 23 different translations of the bible. Remarkably, and for the first time ever, not one of those kids had the King James Version, or, as they called it “the thee’s and thou’s one” to read the psalm in the words we probably all know best. But all of their bibles attributed the twenty-third psalm to King David. In his first career, David was literally a shepherd. But kings in many cultures and nations in the ancient near east portrayed themselves, or paid their PR people to portray them, as conscientious shepherds, protecting and providing for their subjects like well cared for sheep. Of course, most of them didn’t do that. Even David, the best king that ancient Israel had, began to normalize the self-serving abuse of power that is too often synonymous with political leadership. Remember, it was never God’s plan for Israel to be ruled by an earthly king; God was supposed to be their only lord and king to prevent the corruption and exploitation typical of the ruling class. And we know that’s what ended up happening, as our reading from Jeremiah accuses the shepherds (the kings) of scattering the sheep (God’s people).

Whether David himself authored Psalm 23 or another psalmist wrote it and envisioned David as its speaker, this psalm gives back to God the rightful place as king of all—the only king who actually does all the things this shepherd is said to do. Since we so often pray Psalm 23 at funerals, we may be used to thinking of the divine shepherd’s actions as future, heavenly promises. But the psalm is almost all in the present tense: the Lord *is* my shepherd, the Lord *makes* me lie down, and *leads* me; the Lord *restores, guides, comforts, and anoints* me. The Lord seats me in the place of honor at the banqueting table, vindicating me in front of my enemies. My cup *is* running over—*now*. These are not pie in the sky by and by promises; the Lord is doing all of these practical things now, in this life.

Jesus didn’t invent the shepherding imagery, but the gospel writers use it for him so that their communities, who were used to hearing their rulers try to claim the persona of shepherd, would have immediately recognized that they were to think of Jesus as a king. What is

different, however, is that Jesus really does all the things that the shepherds are supposed to do. Here, Mark says Jesus has compassion on the people “because they were like a sheep without a shepherd.” And of course the people are like sheep without a shepherd because their king acts nothing like a good shepherd; this passage immediately follows the story of the beheading of John the Baptist by King Herod—a lousy shepherd if ever there was one. His father, Herod the Great was considered a great king by worldly standards, but he, too, was a bad shepherd. The people need a good shepherd-king. But if Jesus is a good shepherd, that means he’s also king of a kingdom that does work like the typical kingdoms of this world.

Artists have given us many representations of Jesus as shepherd and Jesus as king. The problem is that they look very similar. More often than not, Jesus looks like he has managed to corral his very clean sheep without ever messing up his hair or getting manure on his robes. He seems to be more of a gentleman farmer who still looks like an earthly king whether he’s wearing a crown or not. And he is wearing a crown in so many paintings and icons—not the crown of thorns he really wore but a bejeweled crown of gold that makes him look just like any of the kings whose portraits hang on the walls of the palaces of history. In a way, all of that art does more harm than good. Jesus wasn’t a shepherd who was afraid to get his hands dirty; the point of the incarnation was that God set aside all divine honor and glory to experience thoroughly human life, with all of the messiness that comes along with it. If Jesus was willing to go to the cross, he would have picked up a dirty sheep even if it would have gotten mud on his clothes. And Jesus is not the kind of king we would find wearing a crown made of jewels and precious metals—a show of wealth and a symbol of hierarchy. Jesus did not use his power and position to lord it over his people. He became servant of all, washing the disciples’ feet, teaching that selfless loving service was the hallmark of God’s kingdom of earth, telling his followers to stop arguing over who got the places closest to the throne.

It is an easy mistake to make, since we can’t really get outside our own experience, but we are not meant to think of Jesus as just a better king than the kings we’ve read about in history books. He’s not just “more” of all the things that we think rulers or leaders should be. He’s not after a more expensive crown, or a bigger castle, or a higher throne. The kingdom of God is not just a bigger, better version of the kingdom of humanity—it’s entirely different. The goals aren’t the same; the principles aren’t the same; the methods aren’t the same. We try to make Jesus fit into the image we have of an earthly king; but we are called to live as subjects of the one who re-defines kingship as good shepherding. That will absolutely require us to re-align our values, to not judge our experience as the world would; but the Shepherd promises us restoration, guidance, comfort, and that we do not need to fear. We are no longer sheep without a shepherd; may we boldly follow where we are led.