

Sermon Preached on May 8, 2022 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

By The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

Acts 9:36-43

Psalm 23

Revelations 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

Led by the Shepherd

At a recent church service at St. Ansgar Lutheran Church in Portland, where Tasha and I attended before I received my call here, parishioners were greeted in the sanctuary by all of the artwork from the building which depicted Jesus propped up at the front of the sanctuary.

From the small pictures of that nicely-smiling, bearded Jesus that adorned so many Sunday school rooms for the past 60 years, to the giant oil painting of Jesus as the Good Shepherd that hung in their narthex, there they all were gathered at the front of the church.

There were maybe 15 or so images of various sizes, but the one thing they had in common – in each of them Jesus was depicted as a white man.

You see, over the past few years, members of St. Ansgar have participated in the Sacred Ground program in partnership with St. Luke's – a program that many of you have also taken.

Members of St. Ansgar were struck by the message in one of the class gatherings that talked about the importance of how Jesus is depicted in our places of worship because how we see Jesus depicted influences who we understand who Jesus to be; and this class talked about how the portrayals of Jesus as a white man has nurtured the link between Christianity and white supremacy in the United States.

It wasn't long after this class that participants in the program started a campaign to "take down white Jesus"

It didn't happen immediately, but eventually the artwork was taken down, and on this particular Sunday it was gathered at the front of the sanctuary.

As a community they honored the history of some of the pieces – some of it original artwork made just for them, others reproductions – talked about why it was important to do this kind of thing, and then put the art away.

A new team has assembled and they are experimenting with the imagery that now fills the space.

When you walk into St. Ansgar now, instead of that large oil painting of a white Jesus the Good Shepherd, there is a collage of images that depict the various ways this team visualize and understand who God is and who God is in Jesus.

How we understand who God is and who God is in Jesus matters, because how we understand who God is and who God is in Jesus is also who God is in us, for us, with us - pick your preposition.

And we need to take an inventory every now and then of the images we are holding onto and how they're influencing our faith.

There are very few visual depictions of Jesus in this building outside of the stained glass in the chapel – but, I would imagine that between all of us gathered we have an “image” of who Jesus is or was.

Our scriptures are full of these images especially from the gospel of John – Jesus uses a lot of imagery to describe himself like:

I am the Bread of Life (John 6:35)

I am the Light of the World (John 8:12)

I am the Door (John 10:9)

I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11,14)

I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25)

I am the Way and the Truth and the Life (John 14:6)

I am the Vine (John 15:1,5)

This morning, our gospel lesson leans into the Shepherd imagery: “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.” (John 10:27-28)

And, from what I understand, some of the earliest paintings and drawings of Jesus that have been found in archeological digs were of a man with a sheep over his shoulders: Jesus the Good Shepherd.

To the earliest followers of Jesus, that was the image that spoke to them – that was the image that inspired them, consoled them.

Later we would get different images of Jesus like the mosaic at the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul which dates back to 537 but they think the mosaic dates to the 13th century – the mosaic depicts an image of Jesus as a King – a far cry from the meager shepherd boy – but that image must have been meaningful to them then.

Then there’s the 21st Century image of “Jesus as your homeboy” which depicts Jesus kind of pointing out to a crowd and giving a wink almost like a musician on a stage greeting his audience. What does that say about who Jesus is in our generation!?

But that shepherd imagery is one that hasn’t really gone away.

It is an image of Jesus – a way of understanding who our Savior is – that has stayed meaningful throughout the centuries, and I find that kind of thing powerful.

There was an image I saw of Jesus this week that played on the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but this time it was “Jesus the Good Escort”.

It depicts Jesus walking alongside a feminine looking person as they part a path which has characters on one side holding signs that say “murderer” and “killer” and on the other holding signs that read “your body my choice” and “forced birth for the poor”

Jesus is depicted with a halo over his head and wearing his classic tunic which makes him immediately identifiable, but over his tunic he’s wearing a vest that says “Clinic Escort” in both English and Spanish.

The cartoonist has labeled the image using a phrase from the Gospel of Matthew: “With you always”

Political? Yes

Timely? Yes

Heartbreaking? Yes

Profound? Yes

Biblically sound? I think so, yes

It's both liberating and frustrating how significantly little Jesus said about some of the most pressing political issues of our time that are raised in the name of faith: gay rights, trans/non-binary rights, choice rights.

I once had a pamphlet that said on the front "Everything Jesus ever said about homosexuality" and when you opened the pamphlet it was blank inside.

Didn't Jesus know this would come up 2,000 years after his death, couldn't he have given us something to work with?

Couldn't he have been more clear about who he was and what he thought?

Dr. Karoline Lewis from Luther Seminary in St. Paul points out that in today's reading "Jesus is asked directly whether he is the Messiah." It seems others want to know who he is and what he's about.

She goes on to point out: "Jesus' response, however, is less than clear. Instead of saying, "I have told you that I am the Messiah," he responds, "I have told you." What, Jesus? What have you told us? But then, Jesus goes on and connects his identity back to his sheep. He never calls himself the good shepherd [in this particular passage]. Rather, he points to his relationship with the sheep...Jesus doesn't answer the inquiry with who he is, but for what he desperately longs—to be in relationship with his sheep. And therein lies the goodness.

"I had to sit with that realization for a bit" Dr. Lewis writes. "I want clarity. Jesus wants connection. I want to know what to believe. Jesus wants belonging."¹

Relationship, connection, belonging.

That's who God is, that's who God is in Jesus – relationship, connection, belonging – the shepherd, the escort, the accompanier.

The one who is with us and knows us through all of life's trials.

Relationship, connection, belonging – that's who God is for us, with us, IN us as we are now Christ to the world.

For me, this is the image of who Jesus is, the image of faithfulness that I cling to in these challenging days and these have been the teachings of faith that have made me the advocate for choice that I am.

¹ Lewis, Karoline. "The Good Shepherd." Working Preacher. 1 May 2022. <<https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/the-good-shepherd>>

Knowing, loving, and caring for beloveds who have had abortions – knowing their stories and making human something that feels so non-human by the way it's talked about in the media and society.

Perhaps it shouldn't matter whether you know someone or not who has had an abortion, and, statistically speaking, it's likely we all do, but our stories do matter to Jesus, our humanness matters to God.

And our God is not a God who abandons us at our moments of need, but the one who escorts us to safety – who accompanies us in our lives and in particular at our times of greatest need.

It's the oldest image of understanding who God is and who God is in Christ, but it's one I'm not ready to put away yet – it is still teaching me, still informing me, still inspiring me.

I know it seems ironic that today, Mother's Day, I'm preaching about remembering and honoring the choice individuals have in whether or not to be parents.

But isn't that the beautiful spectrum of real life that God can hold with us?

Doesn't that depict the magnificent diversity of sheep that God has created us to be and Jesus, the faithful, caring Shepherd who tends to all of us?

Today, and every day, God is with you who have wombs that have carried babies to term and God is with those who have lost pregnancies either by choice, by accident, or by nature.

God tends to you who were never able to be pregnant and who grieve that loss.

We give thanks to God, our great parent, who is a source of strength and inspiration to all who mother either as parents, aunts, or beloved kin.

We celebrate the advances in society and science which allow us to create families is more than one way.

We ask that God would continue to shepherd those who are on the path to much desired parenthood and that God will give you courage and comfort through all of the trials and challenges that process can pose.

Thank you God, Jesus our Good Shepherd, for shepherding us through this time of tension and weariness and for the gifts of connection, belonging and relationship.

Amen.