

Sermon: Out Like a Lamb

Scripture: John 10:1-10

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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When I spent a year at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in CT, a Benedictine monastery and a working farm there was a powerful moment in their huge Easter Vigil service late on Holy Saturday night when Mother Ruth, the shepherdess of the Abbey, would bring into the candle-lit sanctuary a lamb. She would walk the center aisle and bring the lamb to the front where with incense and holy water the priest would bless the lamb who a year later would be offered for the feast of Easter. During my year at the Abbey, I not only participated in the birthing of lambs – one had triplets that year which Mother Ruth named after the closing verses of Psalm 23 – Shirley, Goodness and Mercy – but I also participated in the slaughter of the sheep for the Abbey’s Easter meal. The immersion into the processes of the earth, there at the Abbey, coupled with the liturgical cycles of prayer and worship was intense and dramatic for me and actually brought me back to the faith after years away from it... granted it was helpful that there was also a beautiful artist there at the Abbey named Tracy but it was more about the prayer and worship, for me, than a woman... I swear!

But that one year’s experience at the Abbey left me with a new awareness that any reference to sheep and shepherd in our scriptures was not as a sweet little metaphor of gentleness, kindness, and care but one of messy births and bloody deaths, which is in fact exactly how the Gospel of John intended us to hear the metaphor. Sheep, while they did provide agricultural products for people in the ancient Mediterranean

world, were first and foremost raised to be animals of slaughter for sacrifice in the religious complex of the day. So as Jesus is first introduced in the Gospel of John as “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”, we are not to then imagine Jesus as a lovely, gentle presence in a green pasture but an vulnerable human under the bloody knife of sacrifice. We are not supposed to respond with “awww!” but “eschhhhhh!”

Sheep surface throughout the Gospel of John, first in this early reference to Jesus being the lamb of God, then in John chapter 5, still a few chapters prior to the one that Liz read for us this morning, when Jesus heals a man near what was called the Sheep’s Gate in Jerusalem which is a particular entrance through the city wall that has a gate and a gatekeeper and it’s where sheep were corralled for one reason and one reason only – to be sacrificed at the temple, economically to provide food and currency for the temple system and religiously to provide a scapegoat for the atonement of people’s sin – so they would ritually heap the people’s sin upon the lamb and then sacrifice it and thereby take away the sin of the people.

So then when we come to John chapter 10 and hear all this talk about sheep and shepherd and the gate and Jesus saying “I am the gate and I am the sheep and the Shepherd”, it is supposed to be obvious to us – and also rather shocking - that Jesus is placing himself and his purpose right smack in the middle of the temple’s sacrificial system which made the ancient world go round! And he steps right in there to apparently gum up the works of those nasty bloody machinations. He becomes himself the innocent sacrificial victim, the lamb of God, and forever breaks open in human consciousness an awareness of our vicious

human tendency to sacrifice others for the benefit of ourselves. Whether that's as innocuous seeming as 2 people bonding to one another by speaking badly about a third or as gruesome as one group placing another in gas chambers, it's all the vicious human sin practice of scapegoating... which is the core sin that Jesus takes away - or at least begins to unravel – from human consciousness.

Scapegoating was represented graphically and dramatically in the ancient practice of the religious sacrificial system which made for a perfect time and place for Jesus to come for God's purposes but that ancient practice is expressed every time we scapegoat others, blaming them as the problem and freeing ourselves of responsibility for our own participation in evil. Every time we point to the guilty other to justify the innocence or worthiness of ourselves, we participate in the human sacrificial system that Jesus went and died - as a sheep to the slaughter - in order to eliminate.

As lovely as the communion table looks, as sweet as it is for us to participate together in the breaking of bread and the drinking of the cup, we must not forget that this table at least in part represents the altar, the sacrificial stone used to sacrifice innocent animals to appease angry gods. But here the table is turned, so to speak, and we have an altar where it is God Godself who was sacrificed to appease angry humans and to gum up the works of our sacrificial machinations. So ideally as we participate here we are convicted of heart, recognize our own sinful tendency to scapegoat and sacrifice others, we repent, and in receiving the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ we enter a new realm –called the Kingdom of God - where we no longer scapegoat others to establish our own innocence or call others impure to affirm

our own purity, to eliminate others to secure ourselves or define ourselves over and against others but we become defined and secured and made pure by one thing and one thing only – Jesus Christ, the lamb of God, by whose blood we are washed, the very Son of God, who takes away the sin of the world, Amen!