



Today is often referred to as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” Our Scripture readings tell of God’s care for us- as a shepherd cares for the flock. For some, the image of God – of Jesus- as a shepherd is comforting. For others it is saccharine or anachronistic. And for some, because it is read so often at funerals, reading Psalm 23 is one they would rather skip altogether.

Having said that, remember that because God is more than we can imagine, we – and those who have come before us including those who wrote the Scriptures- use images, analogies, metaphors and other literary devices to try to explain who and what God is. We use those figures of speech to help us feel connected to God in ways that make sense to us and within our cultural context. In today’s world, looking for a contemporary image for safety, it seems that no matter what image is chosen, not everyone would find the image and its connotations representative of safety.

A police officer – a teacher – a doctor – a lawyer. Each of those images might signify someone who is safe and who has my best interests at heart for me, but perhaps not for you. Our own experiences color the image used, no matter what it is. A shepherd for most of us Americans, though, perhaps because most of us don’t have first-hand contact with shepherds, seems more innocuous, I suspect. Language is imperfect but it is what we have to work with.

Similarly, two Sundays ago we began to consider our readings from Revelation. I highlighted some ways in which numbers were used as a code. For example, 12 symbolizes completeness and fulfillment. You may recall from prior years or from other situations reading about 144,000 being saved. $12 \times 12 \times 1,000$. Completeness taken to the next level. The ultimate if you will. One way some have interpreted this number is to suggest that only 144,000 over all time and over the entire earth will be saved. An exclusionary approach to God’s love for humanity.

But today we read about great multitudes from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages – no one could count how many. They were all crying out that salvation belongs to our God. This counteracts the interpretation that only 144,000 would be saved. If multitudes – so many that no one could count them- appear before the throne, then seeing 144,000 as the maximum who would be saved seems incorrect. Rather, since those multitudes included people from all tribes and peoples and languages, perhaps we are better to understand that all peoples, regardless of where they were born or when are ones who may find themselves in that number who understand God as the source of their salvation.

It’s also interesting that the author writes that the multitudes come from every nation, every tribe and people and languages- perhaps references back to the Tower of Babel and the day of

Pentecost when the flames of the Holy Spirit descended upon all those present and each understood others in their own language. The Tower of Babel *separated* us into separate groups based on our different languages and the Day of Pentecost *brought us back together* with an ability to understand others who spoke a language different from our own. God gathers us back together regardless of our background or secular differences when we are willing to acknowledge that God is our savior.

Another puzzlement for some is the image of being washed in the blood of the Lamb and that resulting in robes being white. Anyone who has washed clothes that have a blood stain knows that it can be difficult to get the bloodstain out. You certainly don't want to wash the robe in hot water – that will set the bloodstain rather than removing it. It's a bit counter-intuitive, as usually we wash whites in hot water. It's counter-intuitive just like believing in Jesus and the life he set before us is often counter-intuitive.

What we may not remember today is that in the Old Testament, the people were forbidden to eat blood. Blood is life and life belongs to God. Genesis 9:4 states “that you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.”

The image of dazzling white robes appears in other places in Scripture and especially in the Transfiguration. White robes thus symbolize purity and transformation. Through the death of Jesus, our sins are forgiven and thus our robes become dazzling white. This is one reason that in some traditions which baptize using full immersion, those being baptized wear white robes. Those of us who serve at the altar wear an alb or similar garment that is white, reminding us of this verse from Revelation. Our lives and our service should reflect the sacrifice of Jesus so that we might have life and have abundant life.

Sacrifice is to make something holy. In our Eucharistic Prayers we speak of a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Partly, I think, to remind us that sacrifice is not always a negative. It can be a deliberate and joyful act recognizing God as the giver of all good gifts.

God's promise to us is that when we accept the sacrifice that Jesus made that God will ensure that we hunger no more and we thirst no more when God's realm is reality on this earth. God will be our shepherd guiding us to springs of the water of life and all tears will be wiped away.

We study scripture to learn more about God and how God is revealed to us. Even with the most diligent study, though, God is more than we can imagine. It doesn't mean we should stop studying. It does mean that we can move closer to God even as we know that we will not fully know God in this lifetime.

Deacon Dave Guilfoyle, serves at Trinity, Lawrenceburg, with Mary Taflinger whom many of you know from her time here at St. John's. Dave is a retired engineer who used to train engineers in other parts of the world for General Electric. He explains the challenge of Scripture this way: when we translate something from English to French, we are looking for an exact word equivalency. Work in English becomes Travail. Translation: one to one equivalency. The challenge becomes when we interpret what work means. For some it means 60 hours a week; for others 40 hours a week. For some it is how they define themselves; for others it is what they do to earn money to live a life outside of their Monday-Friday employment. Interpretation and translation are not always equivalents.

And some words do not translate from one language to another. Think, for example, of enchilada. It does not have an English counterpart- we simply use the word enchilada to describe a tortilla filled with cheese or beans or meat, rolled, and sometimes covered in sauce. In this case, translation is not helpful. Interpretation may be when we describe an easy-to-eat on the run and easy to prepare staple of Mexican food. Crepe would be the same = no one-to-one-translation although we can get somewhat close with pancake.

Remember that Revelation was originally written in Greek near the end of the first century. It was translated into Latin by Jerome in the late 4th Century. The Latin was translated into English about 1380 by John Wycliff. And that translation into English has been re-translated several times since. On Sundays, our Scriptures comes from the New Revised Standard Version which was published in 1989. And sometimes, in Bible Study when we're struggling with a text, The Message- which is a paraphrase and not a translation- has been helpful to us.

Besides the potential errors of translation, we also have incredible changes in culture that impact how we read and how we understand Scripture. It's no wonder then that we can have trouble understanding the symbols used in Revelation. Despite all that, it is worth our struggling with the text and engaging in conversation with others to hear what God is saying to us.

One scholar has written that John, the author of Revelation, seeks to enlighten his readers by giving them a new understanding of reality. They no longer have to suffer at the hands of Rome but rather they are in charge of their own destiny. They can choose to follow Jesus believing that in the resurrection we are granted eternal life where they will be no hunger, no thirst and where God will be our shepherd ensuring that we have all we need. For us, our task is to continue to read and ponder our Scriptures- on Sundays and also on other days of the week. God has blessed us with reason and skill so that we can learn and live together in community. And whether you like the 23rd Psalm or would be happy never to hear it again, remain with us as part of this community who seeks to know and to do God's work in this world. **Amen.**