

“Focal Practice”

John 10:11-18

Forth Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday); April 25, 2021

Life is mainly lived by forms and patterns. If the forms are bad, we live badly. The stories from the Bible are a good and true form, by which we live well. The Bible is storytelling at its best, creating a world of presuppositions, assumptions, and relations into which we enter. The stories of the Bible invite us into a world far more exciting than ourselves, a world larger than ourselves. The stories are good and true, and the world that they invite us into is the world of God's creation, salvation, and blessing.

Within this large, generous context of the biblical story Christians are formed. We learn to think accurately, behave ethically, pray honestly, worship passionately, obey faithfully. But we dare not abandon the story as we go off and do these things. If we abandon the story, we reduce reality to the narrow dimensions of our own minds, our own feelings, and our own personal experience. The moment we abandon the story — purposely or through gradual forgetfulness — we become quick to formulate our own doctrines, to draw-up our own codes of ethics, and to throw ourselves into a dishonest life of pseudo-discipleship and ministry apart from a constant re-immersion in the story itself. Whenever this happens we risk failing to see the concrete presence and activity of the one true God among us. We then set up church for ourselves, a church made in our own image.

Stories matter. The Bible story is a good and true form that brings centuries of Hebrew storytelling — God telling his story of creation and salvation through his people — to the story of Jesus, the mature completion of all the stories, in a way that invites. More than that, the Jesus story *insists* that we be more than just spectators. Salvation, a careful listener should note, isn't something any of us can control. At the same time, it isn't just something that happens to us while we passively sit by. We're drawn in as participants with the freedom of knowing that it all doesn't depend on us. We are caught up in a story that reveals, that is, this story shows us something we could never come up with on our own by observation or experiment or guess. The story engages us as recipients, without having the responsibility dumped on us for making it turn out right. Making it turn out right is God's job and we can trust that God has a handle on it. It's in the gospel where God brings to completion the marvelous story of his work of salvation through his Son, Jesus the Messiah. And it's this Jesus who is the focus of the gospel.

Read through any of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) and you may notice that there are no pedestals for anyone except for Jesus (and Jesus's pedestal was a cross). As impressive as Peter and the rest of the apostles may have been to the early Christians, they are never allowed to eclipse Jesus. The gospel is never about them, although they are included. The focus is always on Jesus.

In other words, the salvation story is told in such a way as to prevent us from setting apart anybody as spiritually upper-class, to prevent us from putting them on pedestals. We're recipients of the salvation story and the savior is Jesus — only Jesus. There's nothing in the gospel that will play into our preference for dealing with famous celebrities instead of Jesus Christ and him crucified. Every one of us — down to the last man, woman, and child — if we are saved, is saved by grace and grace alone.

Maintaining that simplicity and focus, that salvation is by God's initiative and grace in Jesus, has proved to be one of the most difficult things to maintain in the Christian community — then and now. In a world that panders easier ways of dealing with our souls than dealing with God in Jesus, the gospel continues to provide the honest ground to which we all return from our God-detours and soul-diversions

Against the world that idolizes do-it-yourself salvation schemes stands John's gospel. Here we focus on Jesus engaging in conversation after conversation, engaging in person-to-person communication with people who are so much like us. Jesus isn't shown to be just a functional savior. He's a relational person. When he speaks, God speaks. In Jesus, the God who had spoken in the Old

Testament speaks again, but with a human face and in personal conversation. And there's an intimate and leisurely way in which he goes about it. We see miraculous "signs" that are not meant to impress our preferences with a marketing blitz, but are simply meant to give us a focused look into the heart of Jesus instead of overlooking him.

"Glory" is a key term in John's gospel. It's a word associated with the brilliance, weight, and honor of the revealed presence of God, with seeing a glimpse of God. Jews at that time expected that God's presence would return to the temple in Jerusalem with glory. But John says, in effect, "We saw the Glory. It was Jesus who was God right here among us." And not only that, John ties the death of Jesus on the cross to the moment of glorification, the revealing of the glory of God and its greatest splendor. There can be hardly any question about the gospel's intent: the plot, emphasis, and meaning of Jesus is his death.

Jesus had already been facing death threats when he declared, "I am the good shepherd... The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." John, after dazzling us with pleasant images of light and life, actually increases the emphasis on death. In fact, one-half of John's gospel is allotted to this. But it's far more than the simple fact of death that Jesus talked about. This is clearly defined death: "...I lay down my life so that I can take it up again. Nobody takes it from me; I lay it down of my own accord." That's shunning. Jesus's death was voluntary. He knew that he didn't have to go to Jerusalem. He went on his own volition. Jesus gave his assent to death. This wasn't an accidental death. This wasn't unavoidable death.

A few weeks ago, I watched a Tom Hanks movie from 2013 called, *Captain Phillips*. In April 2009 Captain Richard Phillips made a similar choice. When attacked by pirates off the coast of Somalia, rather than surrendering his ship and crew, Captain Phillips handed himself over. For all he knew he was sealing his fate. Captain Phillips was willing to sacrifice his own life so that others might live.

Similar to the life of a sea captain, the life of a shepherd was anything but picturesque. It was dangerous, risky, and menial. Shepherds were rough around the edges, spending time in the fields rather than in polite, genteel society. It's so easy to get lost in the sentimental revelry about white fluffy sheep gamboling on green hillsides with sweet Jesus meek and mild. The image of shepherd reminds us that God is especially concerned for those at risk, those who are vulnerable. Sheep are lost without the constant, vigilant care of their shepherd. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who defined his death as sacrificial, that is, as a means to live for others, when "he took bread... 'Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.' He took the cup... 'this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many'..." Maybe those words of the standard Communion liturgy have become too familiar. People have suggested that they be skipped. Can they no longer feel the sharp edge on those words?

A number of years ago I included a sermon response survey in the worship bulletin. Some of those returned said something to the effect, "Pastor Greg needs to say something inspirational that connects with my life and helps me get through the week." The sermon text that particular week happened to be this one about the Good Shepherd. The response baffled me. Was I talking about a dead shepherd? Was I disconnected from what matters to life? I really hope not, because I can think of nothing that has so penetrated the Christian imagination as this death and all its details. Think of all the music, art, literature, drama, architecture, and all of its effects that continue to be on display in the numerous men and women who struggle daily to give up their own attempts to save themselves, who stop trying to make something out of their lives on their own terms, and who take up Jesus's cross and follow him. Is this disconnection? You tell me. I maintain that this death is what connects everything. Maybe all this cross-talk isn't very exciting for those looking for inspiration or whatever. There's nothing there except Jesus.

The Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep gathers everything into himself and finishes the work of salvation. Everything that goes into the work of salvation is found in this death. And everything that goes into our involvement in salvation is found in this death.

The church dares to counter our fickle culture's attitude toward death by letting the gospel's salvation story shape our understanding of Jesus's death as precisely a death that is, as the classical Nicene Creed has it, "for us and for our salvation." And it's because this death is a means to life, a means to salvation for every last one of us — you and me included. We define it in the company of resurrection as we are so bold to claim in the Communion liturgy: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." When you hear horrible news on any given day, counter it with truth you should know: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again."

The gospel is the only form and pattern I have to connect with your life. Is that okay? Or would you like me to talk about something else? I hope the gospel helps you through the week as you enter into the story.

Back in the day the apostle Paul said, "...I decided to know nothing in my dealings with you except Jesus the Messiah, especially his crucifixion." I have no "preacher stories" that yield the right practical lesson or cute little stories that end up in triumph without struggle. Such cutesy stories are despicable lies about human life and Christian faith. Such lies are the marks of a dishonest preacher. There's too much of that nowadays. I don't want to add to the dishonesty.

What we get instead is John the Evangelist giving us wonderful imagery showing the blessed reassurance we find in Jesus as our Shepherd. The Easter message is that Jesus returns to us and will never let us go. Our reassurance isn't based on what we do or don't do, but on what Jesus does in his role as the Good Shepherd who knows *you* by name: "I know my own sheep, and my own know me — just as the father knows me and I know the father."

Given all this, the mess of history in which the world as we made it finds itself, the ever-present dangers of a moralism that offers to put us in charge of our lives, the sacrificial death of Jesus announcing the good news of salvation, what do we do? What is there left for us to do?

Here in the sanctuary or there where others may be, yet gathered in one heart and mind, we get to do "focal practice." We reorient ourselves on honest ground. We're recipients of this salvation story and the savior is Jesus. The glory of the cross is Jesus's death, his broken body, and poured-out blood for the remission of our sins. We remember what God does for us Jesus. The cross reminds us of who Christ is and what we are.

A couple of weekends ago my family and I were at a gasoline station in Wayland. A large man walked inside contemptuously ignoring the sign on the door that said to please wear a mask. Around his neck a conspicuous gold cross dangled from a heavy gold chain. Two large patriotic tattoos were on his forearms: the left saying "pride," the right saying "freedom." I'm guessing he was rather proud of his personal liberty to do whatever he wants without any concern for the common good. He apparently thought his individual rights were God-given. "Pride"/"freedom" — what a petty interpretation of the meaning of the cross. I didn't want to risk him disconnecting my head from my shoulders by pointing out his bad theology. Still, I wonder, how did we get to where there seems to be so much disconnection about the meaning of the cross among so many who advertise themselves as "Christian"? After all, isn't God supposed to be love, and thus aren't we supposed to love our neighbor? What happened to love?

When I stop at the cross of Christ, I can see the love of God. When I look at the blood, all I see is love, love, love. But I can't see competition. I can't see hierarchy. I can't see pride or prejudice or the abuse of authority. I can't see nationalism. I can't see lust for power. I can't see manipulation. I can't see rage or anger or selfish ambition.

I can't see unforgiveness. I can't see hate or envy. I can't see stupid fighting or bitterness, or jealousy. I can't see empire building. I can't see selfishness. I can't see self-importance. I can't see back-stabbing or vanity or arrogance. None of these things can I see.

I see surrender, sacrifice, salvation, humility, righteousness, faithfulness, grace, forgiveness, love! Love... love...

When I stop! ... at the cross of Jesus ... I see the love of God. What do you see?

The gospel, the story of crucifixion, is the only form and pattern I have to connect with your life. Life is mainly lived by forms and patterns. If the forms are bad, we live badly. We ultimately become what we believe. The percentage of Americans now belonging to a church is 47%. That's down from 70% in 1999. Why? Because far too many red-blooded American Christians wear the cross while failing to know the cross. Now more than ever, the church needs to practice its focus on "Jesus the Messiah, especially his crucifixion." Give me Jesus. Give me death to myself. This death is our life.

I hope the gospel of Jesus helps you through the week as you enter into the story because that's all I'm going to say.

Let us pray —

Shepherd, Lord, your church is in need of focal practice:

In this world of sports stars and superstars, you alone are God.

In this world of cyber stalkers and stock markets, you alone are God.

In this world of presidents and prime ministers, you alone are God.

In this world of *Amazon* and *Walmart*, you alone are God.

In this world of armed shooters and armed forces, you alone are God.

In this world of smart phones and tech upgrades, you alone are God.

In this world of viral pandemic and viral stupidity, you alone are God.

In this world of salaries and lay-offs, you alone are God.

In this world of money, sex, and power, you alone are God.

You alone are our savior, O Christ.

We cannot save ourselves.

In you alone is our life, the hope of glory. Amen.



"Answering the Shepherd's Call" — photograph by Gordon Oswalt