

“Windows to the World: The Good Shepherd”

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

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John 10:1-18

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Today we begin a new sermon series, entitled Windows to the World. Over the next several weeks, we will be considering some of the beautiful stained glass windows in whose reflection we worship each week. Many of us probably take these works of art for granted, not realizing that they are so much more than mere decoration. Each window has a story, and not just of historical significance to this church. Each points us to some scriptural message, which speaks not just to how we worship in here, but also to how we are to live out in the world. They are a beautiful gift, one that we too easily look past or look through on our way to something else.

This morning, we will consider the Brenizer window, which is in the right rear of the sanctuary. The window was given by a bequest from Addison Brenizer in memory of his parents, Addison and Frances. Many of you may recall Addison’s widow, Julie, sitting close to that window every Sunday until her illness and death in 2013.

The window carries a beautiful history of the church and a beautiful message from the Gospel. It was placed in the church in 1965, and the description of the window at the time pointed out the central figure of Christ the good shepherd, surrounded by his sheep, as the depiction of the Love of God. At the top of the window is the prophet Hosea, bringing word of God’s love, and at the bottom is David with his harp, singing of God as shepherd.

Having sung together David’s words from the 23rd Psalm, let us now turn to John’s gospel for our reading, illuminating Christ as the good shepherd. Reading from John 10:1-18:

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice.

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

I've never liked jumping in to the middle of a story. Walking into a conversation halfway through, changing channels at quarter past the hour and entering the ongoing story of a TV drama, tuning the radio to a program that has made its way through the introduction and is already into the meat of the story- all of these things frustrate me. I don't like feeling like I've missed something, like there are pieces of the story- characters, plot twists, details that I don't know. It's hard to fully appreciate a story without having the full picture.

Scripture can be like that. In bible studies and in worship, we often choose a set of verses to focus on, believing that within them lies a full story. And while there is certainly truth to that belief, we also have to recognize that the whole of scripture is one full story made up of countless smaller parts. Anytime we pull out one verse, or one chapter, even one book, we are necessarily missing a part of the story.

This morning's scripture passage is no exception. While it reads as a discrete unit, it is in fact just one part of a longer discourse in John's gospel, which is just one part of the greater witness of Christ's life and ministry.

This passage is a continuation of a story which begins with chapter 9. Our bible divides this story into two chapters, but it is really one extended narrative that begins with Jesus

healing a man who had been born blind. While his disciples tried to figure out who had sinned and caused the man's blindness in the first place, and the Pharisees grumbled about his healing on the Sabbath, Jesus gave sight to a blind man, illuminating not just his life, but also the truth about the Messiah.

I tell you that not to belabor some exegetical point, but rather so that you won't feel like you loitered too long getting popcorn and missed the critical first five minutes of the movie. To begin to understand the significance of Jesus' self-description as the good shepherd, it helps to know that he has just healed a blind man, and on the Sabbath- in direct opposition to Jewish law, confusing his disciples and angering the authorities. Again.

In Chapter 10, Jesus utilizes a figure of speech- as close as John's gospel gets to a parable- to provide color commentary on the miracle he just performed. Direct on the heels of the extraordinary act giving a man sight for the first time in his life, Jesus illuminates his ministry to the gathered crowd, speaking to them about something very ordinary - a shepherd going into a pen to gather his sheep and lead them out. The images in this figure of speech- sheep, shepherd, gate, bandit, pasture, wolf- were all things first-century Palestinians would know plenty about.

He used a story to show his truth. And like many stories, its simplicity is deceptive.

The image of Jesus as the good shepherd is not just a sweet, pastoral scene meant to give shallow comfort. While it makes for good art, as the Brenizer window so beautifully illustrates, and conjures up lovely pictures of fluffy sheep and placid meadows, of kind caretakers whiling away the day in the sunshine amidst the soft bleats of docile animals, we are mistaken if we that's all we take from this passage.

It is tempting, but a mistake for us to overly domesticate this image. Yes, a shepherd is a caregiver, and that is vital to our understanding of God as a God of love. But a shepherd is also a guardian and a protector, and as Jesus articulates, this shepherd is not only willing to lay down his life for the sheep, he actually does it. More than simply a passive presence, the good shepherd is an active player in the lives of the sheep, giving his life for their protection.

We don't have to stretch to begin to understand this image. Just a week out from our glorious Easter celebration, we remember that Jesus, surrounded by doubt, betrayal and violence, laid down his life for us. He faced abandonment, trial, torture and death so that we would not have to. And he triumphed over them so that we would know that the powers of sin and darkness which seem so strong ultimately do not prevail.

The good shepherd laid down his life for the sheep not to prove some point or to be dramatic, but because the sheep need saving. Multiple times in this brief passage, Jesus

points out the dangers that are ever-present: the stranger, thieves and bandits, the wolves- all the external forces who seek to take and destroy. Their voices tempt the sheep to stray, despite the presence and the care of the shepherd.

We are not so unlike the sheep. We try to go about our lives, doing what we are called to do, but every day we hear the voices of the so-called thieves and bandits- they are the voices telling us that we aren't enough- rich enough, popular enough, skinny enough, smart enough, tough enough. They are the voices of the world that entice us with visions of wealth and power and ease and simplicity. They are voices that tempt us with what they offer, trying to make us think that what they offer is worth the price they ask. They are all the powers and the people in this world who want us for what we can do for them.

These voices say that what they have for us will give us life, but they are wrong. Only the voice of the good shepherd promises- and can give- life in abundance. When we listen closely enough, we can hear that.

Twice, Jesus says that the sheep listen to the voice of the shepherd. It's a curious thing, considering this story is meant to help explain how he healed a blind man. Our ability to see what is important is directly connected to our willingness to listen not to the many voices who seek to exploit or harm us, but to the voice of the one who came to bring us life.

In his Pulitzer-prize winning novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, author Anthony Doerr examines the interplay between the senses of sight and hearing through an epic story set during World War II. The story revolves around a young French girl, Marie-Laure, who becomes blind due to illness at age 6, and a young German orphan named Werner, who has a gift for tinkering and falls in love with the emerging technology of the radio. Though they lead very different lives, the plot carries them inexorably towards one another.

When asked about the inspiration for his epic novel, Doerr explained that he wanted "to tell a war story that felt new."¹ Departing from the old images of dashing, inventive resistance heroes and "evil blond" Nazi soldiers, he created two compelling young characters whose stories are intertwined by forces beyond their control. And one critical link is the power of voice. Doerr creatively explores how radio's ability to carry voices across long distances both aided the Reich in gaining support through propaganda broadcast and also helped ordinary people throughout Europe to bring comfort, hope and change in the midst of terror through resistance broadcasts.

Radio also leads the two main characters to a brief but powerful encounter. Near the end of the war that has challenged and changed them both, they cross paths in the small French

¹ *How Anthony Doerr Came To Write "All The Light We Cannot See,"* Scribner Magazine on www.huffingtonpost.com, 3/24/2015

seaside town of St. Malo as it is under siege, the Allies freeing Marie-Laure and her countrymen from the occupation of Werner and his.

They are brought together because of a voice- that of Marie-Laure's late grandfather. As a young boy in the orphanage, Werner had taught himself the basics of electronics, building his own radio so that he could tune into a fascinating radio show that somehow made it to his tiny German town from France. As his ability grows, he soon attracts the attention of the Nazi government, which takes him from the orphanage and enrolls him in a National School which is a training ground for Hitler's army. Werner's aptitude for building and fixing radios secures him an important place in the military, and he finds himself swept along in the powerful current of the war machine.

Meanwhile, Marie-Laure finds herself in St. Malo living with her reclusive great-uncle. After her father is arrested, she learns from her great-uncle that he and her grandfather had years before made gramophone recordings - stories for children about science. But then the First World War tore the brothers away, and Marie-Laure's grandfather was killed.

Devastated by his loss, Etienne, Marie-Laure's great-uncle, built a radio receiver in his attic, and every night he transmitted the recordings of his brother's voice. That voice- a voice of compassion and knowledge was the same one young Werner had listened to on his little radio in the German orphanage- his link to a world beyond his own and a sense that there was a purpose out there for him.

When Etienne played one of the recordings for his great-niece years later, she asked him if he thought that anyone could hear it. He didn't know, he said. He wasn't trying to reach anyone else. He broadcast the old recordings for one reason alone. "I thought that if I made the broadcast powerful enough, my brother would hear me," he said. "That I could bring him some peace, protect him as he had always protected me."

In the midst of a world ripped apart by war, misguided by the vain ambitions of a few, over the crack of rifles and the pounding of bombs, it turned out that a voice of innocence was more powerful than he could have imagined. It may not have achieved his intended purpose, but it still carried hope and comfort- things which seemed like an impossible dream, but which, for a few moments, were very real. It ultimately spoke more clearly and powerfully than all of the voices of hate, mistrust and fear combined.

Voice is a powerful thing, and we are constantly bombarded by the voices calling to us- asking us to be something or do something, to like this or follow that. It can be overwhelming and scary.

When Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," it is a reminder that we do not have to navigate this life alone. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. And in the midst of the

confusion, in the midst of the struggle, in the midst of the sorrow, in the midst of the pain,
“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

There are voices all around, calling to us all the time. Whose voice will you follow?