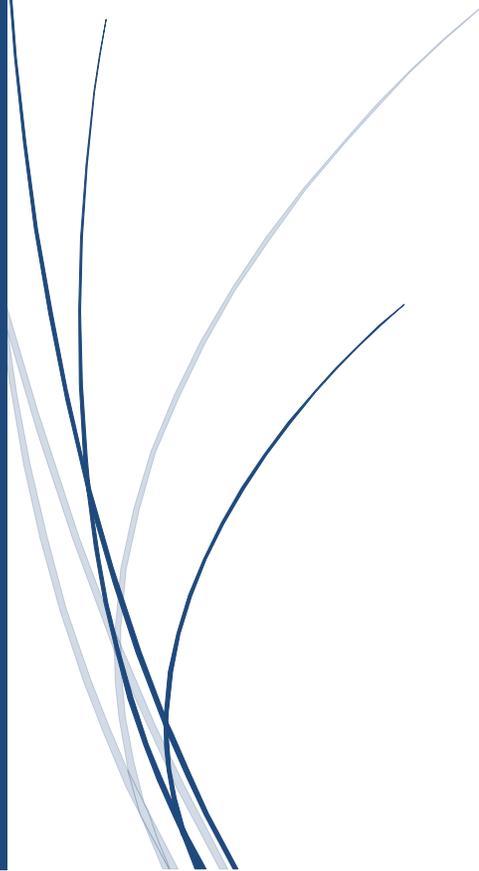




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Mixed Metaphors

John 10:11-18, Psalm 23



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You may remember hearing me say how much I love metaphors – especially in the Bible.

Chapter 10 in the Gospel of John makes me think of my old high school English teacher, Mr. Foley. I can still see his practically illegible handwriting all over my carefully crafted compositions. Red ink everywhere as he constantly rebuked me – correcting me to stop mixing my metaphors. Even back then, I loved metaphors!

Now, it's obvious to me that the author of the Gospel of John never had the benefit of Mr. Foley's guidance. If so, he would never have dared to record Jesus words the way he did in those long I AM passages.

Before we even get to today's chapter, we read that Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," and, "I am the light of the world." In chapter 10 we read that Jesus said, "I am the gate," and, "I am the Good Shepherd." Later on we'll read that Jesus said, "I am the resurrection;" "I am the life;" "I am the Way." "I am the true vine," "I am in God," and "I am in you."

But in the 10th chapter, the writer of the Gospel goes all out. He's got Jesus using not just a regular metaphor, but a mixed metaphor. In chapter 10 we read that Jesus declared, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." And then he mixes it up and says, "I am the Good Shepherd."

So which is it? Gate or shepherd? Come on, I know it's Jesus and all, but I'm trying to understand how Jesus, who is, after all, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, is also both the Gate and the Shepherd.

I doubt that Mr. Foley ever took his red marker to Scripture. If he ever did, the letters MMX would have shown up all over John's Gospel. MMX = mixed metaphor wrong. Looking back, I know that Mr. Foley was just doing his job – trying to get us to be more careful with our writing. But today I might ask him, and indeed the writer of John, what is a metaphor for?

The word metaphor comes from two Greek root words: *meta* which means beyond, and *-phor* from a verb *phero* meaning to carry. So a metaphor is a figure of speech that uses an image to carry us beyond the plain meaning of the words. A mixed metaphor is a figure of speech that uses a mixture of images.

"If there's a spark of pity in your hearts, water it and make it grow."

English teachers don't like mixed metaphors. It's not there's a grammatical rule about it, it's more of a stylistic guideline. Generally, if you mix metaphors you run the risk of weakening the metaphors. It calls attention to the device rather than the meaning. It takes great skill to get away with using a mixed metaphor, and the average person just sounds foolish when they do.

Rush Limbaugh once said, "I knew enough to realize that the alligators were in the swamp and that it was time to circle the wagons." I know what he meant – I think – but, really?

So we might ask, "Is the writer of the Gospel of John skilled enough as a writer to use a mixed metaphor?"

Well, in his own words, "Truly I tell you' – this is no ordinary writer of metaphors." You see, the words of this Gospel carry us way beyond their plain meaning to the Great I AM.

I AM, the very name of God. Yahweh, the name revealed by Moses in the old days.

Yahweh – the letters Y.H.W.H., by the way, is called the tetragrammaton by scholars, and Jehovah is the German transliteration of the Hebrew word. Jehovah and Yahweh are the same word in different languages.

I AM who I AM. I AM who I WILL BE. This writer carries us beyond the WORD; the WORD that is Jesus the Christ, that was there "in the beginning, beyond the WORD, to God's very self. Now that's a metaphor!

The problem is that the writer was a little too clever for our own good. Sure, his 2nd century audience would have understood his skillful use of metaphor, but over the centuries the church has mixed his metaphors to such a degree that we don't really have much of a clue who Jesus was anymore – if we ever did – let alone the Great I AM; the mystery and wonder to which both Jesus and the author of John are trying to carry us -- Beyond the words themselves.

But we can't seem to get the metaphor of Jesus as the Lamb of God out of our heads. In fact, into every one of those great I AM metaphors we mix a little dab of the blood of the Lamb and before you know it Jesus is the way and the truth and the life and unless you believe that Jesus' blood was shed for you, you won't ever be able to pass through the gate, because Jesus is the only way. MMX, MMX, MMX!

Now, we can't blame the Gospel writer for mixing up all these metaphors, it was the Christian church. Somewhere along the way, the religious authorities forgot what a

metaphor is for. Instead of allowing themselves to be carried beyond the literal meaning of the words to the Great I AM, they slaughtered the Lamb of God, and they killed the Word and the wonders of the God who refuses to be pinned down and pigeon-holed by names and labels – the God who insists that Yahweh is my name and will be for all generations. Yahweh – the inexpressible name that can be translated as: I am, I am who I am, I am who I will be, I will be who I will be. Ancient Hebrew can be delightfully and frustratingly ambiguous -- The Great I AM.

The idea that our ancestors chose to give the god they believed to be the creator the verb ‘to be’ as God’s own name, suggests that we might want to take their metaphor seriously. Talk about a word that carries you beyond the meaning of the word: Yahweh – I am who I am. The writer of John, and Jesus himself I might add, is wiser than wise when it comes to the effective use of metaphor.

Too bad the church can’t seem to play with the big dogs. I mean, it’s a shame that we have to reduce the beauty and the mystery of the great “I am” sayings to one simple figure of speech. We are so hung up on Jesus as the Lamb of God that we can’t seem to see him any other way. So we read a snippet of the Gospel and we hear Jesus talking about a shepherd, and we are carried away with thoughts of God as the great big shepherd. So we slap Psalm 23 in there just in case the folks in the pews don’t make the connection, and before you know it, we’ve mixed up the metaphor and added a lamb because we remember that other metaphor about the lost sheep. And then, try as we might, we just can’t help being carried away to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Now we end up with a shepherd who does either one of two things: This shepherd either lets the lamb be sacrificed, or the shepherd himself does the sacrificing!

Confused, yet? If you’re not confused then I’m not doing my job right, because what I wanted to do here is to point out the dangers of not appreciating the art of metaphor in scripture.

The author of the Gospel of John was a master craftsman, skillfully weaving together images of Yahweh that his Jewish listeners would have understood in a heartbeat with no explanation. They knew their own scriptures; images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd would have carried them beyond sheep in the fields to the words of the prophet Ezekiel who repeated the promises of Yahweh to the people of Israel. They would have heard Yahweh’s instructions to the prophet to speak out against the shepherds who had led the people into dangerous territory, the religious authorities who allowed the flock to be scattered and lost.

They would have heard Yahweh’s promises to send a proper shepherd; a good shepherd who would gather the flocks, tend their wounds, and restore them to green

pastures, and they would have known that Jesus was just such a shepherd. They would have rejoiced to have such a shepherd in their midst. And they would have understood perfectly why the religious authorities accused Jesus of being possessed; for surely the religious authorities were the shepherds who had led the sheep into dangerous territory.

After Jesus died so horribly, his followers struggled to understand what had happened – why it happened – and they looked to their own Scriptures to try to make some sense of it all. Back when this was written, there were different, competing theories as to why it happened and what it was all about.

One theory was that Jesus was the Good Shepherd who lay down his life for the sheep. A later theory was that Jesus was the Lamb who was sacrificed to atone for the sins of the world. Two competing metaphors that all too often we mix together; and what we end up with is this impotent God, standing idly by while an innocent lamb is slaughtered -- or worse, a vengeful God demanding a blood sacrifice. These are two metaphors that do not play well together. We shouldn't mix the two.

Isn't it better to live with the mystery of the divinity among us than it is to claim to have divinity bottled up for easy consumption? When we bottle up divinity and sell it like snake oil we do great harm. Instead, we need to learn to dance among the metaphors that carried our ancestors beyond the literal words, so that they could begin to relate to 'God who will be God will be' – I AM who I AM.

Yahweh is more than able to be both shepherd and lamb. We just need to remember that these metaphors serve their purpose independently from each other. God is not the shepherd who let the lamb die, and God is not the shepherd who demands a bloody sacrifice.

One of the great things about metaphor is that it doesn't always carry you to the same place. Metaphors have many destinations, and each of us needs to have the courage and the imagination to go beyond the literal word, to explore the places that the word takes us – wherever that may be. If we have to use mixed metaphors, we have to take care to remember who it is who carries us beyond the beyond, and beyond.

Let the mystery of God live and breathe in you. Celebrate the unknowable. See the abundant life flourishing around you. Rejoice in God beyond all knowing. And enjoy the dance.

Amen.