

“Courageous Sheep”

Acts 4: 1-13

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I. Introduction to Sheep

The beautiful Psalm 23, which we just read, proclaims that God is our shepherd. To follow this metaphor means that we then, are the Lord’s sheep. Now sheep aren’t known for grand amounts of intelligence—though recent research has shown they are on par with the IQ of cattle (ask ranchers in congregation). They follow where their shepherd (and his dogs) direct them, content to munch on grass for most of their day, and baa a good amount. Gregarious animals, sheep like to flock together and eat together—which does resemble the church in many ways. They flee in a herd if approached by a predator or aforesaid sheep dog. They also can be led to new pasture with a bucket of food; they are food-oriented creatures that willingly follow tasty morsels (not unlike a herd of adolescent boys). When Psalm 23 states that the Lord “makes me to lie down in green pastures” the psalmist is describing heaven for a sheep—and then metaphorically for us, too.

II. Peter, Prison, and the Imprisoners

These bubbling, soft, wooly creatures, though, bear little resemblance to the courage and stamina of Peter and John in our scripture text today. Peter may be one of the first “Christian sheep” born out of Christ’s discipleship, but he is no soft-witted creature who can be led with a bucket of food. Peter and the early Christians may flock together, but they couldn’t be herded by the predatory authorities. Peter and John are two incredibly courageous sheep. They truly follow the Lord, and not anyone else, as their Shepherd.

When our story for today begins, Peter is just drawing breath after preaching his heart out. If you were here last week, we read this sermon of Peter’s, which called upon the

Jews to repent and turn to God. Peter's sermons in Acts tend to polarize, with some—here numbering around five thousand—choosing to follow Christ, while others oppose him. After Peter passionately promises in his sermon that repenters will receive refreshment in Christ, the opposition quickly decides they will have nothing to do with this refreshment and they certainly aren't going to repent. Since the highest authorities in Jewish life at the time comprise Peter's primary opposition, they exerted their power and had Peter and John incarcerated overnight.

While Peter and John suffered privations in prison, these authorities probably huddled over candlelight that night to plot their trial case against Peter, John, and the other apostles. The faces gathered around that dim light reflected the powers of Israel. The chief priests and captain of the temple were there; they protected Israel's ritual purity and symbolized official Israel. The Sadducees were there; devout laypeople from the wealthiest, priestly families. Together these authorities comprised the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Israel made up of people with pedigree, social prominence, and education.

This august body was no sheepish flock of dummies. They clearly understood that this new Jesus movement could become a rival sect to the Judaism they ruled. The Sanhedrin sensed a real threat to their power from the followers of Christ. They didn't think that the healing that Peter did for the lame man at the gate came from Yahweh; they couldn't believe that a common fisherman could have done such a powerful thing. As they snuffed out their candles that night, they decided that such danger must be met head on. Peter must come to trial tomorrow and give a defense—a defense he surely wouldn't be able to do as an illiterate, inconsequential fisherman.

III. The Trial

The next morning dawned with high drama. Dressed in their imposing robes of power,

the Sanhedrin gathered en masse as the crowds gathered around them. Into this intimidating and threatening circle the guards led Peter and John. With imperious, hostile stares, they demanded to know from Peter, “By what power or by what name did you do this healing of the lame man?” The Sadducees want to know where Peter got his authority for healing—especially since all authority in Jewish culture was *supposed* to be vested with them. This question hinges on the issue of power.

In response, Peter takes their question, and their whole understanding of power, and turns it upside down. He steps into the very maw of authority, and denounces it.¹ Emboldened by the Holy Spirit breathing through him, Peter proclaims that the name of the power is Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom they (the rulers) crucified and whom God raised. Peter then brilliantly invokes the words of Psalm 118: 22 to support his argument. He personalizes the verse to say that **you**—you rulers and authorities- rejected the very cornerstone of your own salvation. On the trial of his life, Peter accuses the Sanhedrin of being the foolish sheep, of so protecting their power that they executed their own Messiah.

Peter then goes boldly on to offer them one last chance. He preaches their salvation lies in turning to Christ. Christ, and not their earthly powers as the Sanhedrin, is the only one to save them—to save them from their own arrogance and false selves. Jesus Christ is the only one who can save them from their confusion of their power of position with the power of God.² No other name under heaven could possibly save them from their addiction to titles and high rank than Jesus. No other name could reform them from their domination of others, of fisherman like Peter, than Jesus.

¹ Walter Wink, “Those Obstreperous Idiots,” *Christian Century*.

² Mitzi J. Smith, “Acts 4: 5-12,” workingpreacher.org.

Excursus

Now I'm going to leave Peter a moment here to catch his breath after the sermon of his life. His words here could very well lead to his martyrdom.³ Peter knows the Sanhedrin probably won't take well to being told they crucified the cornerstone of their salvation. Nonetheless, with the power of the Holy Spirit, he tried all the tactics he could to convince them that Jesus is the anointed one for them, the Jews. Remember, Peter is preaching here to his own family of faith—abet a very rich and domineering branch of his family tree. He uses Israel's scripture from the Psalms to argue that Christ's redemptive healing is extended to all the people of Israel.⁴

Peter is NOT then, proclaiming an evangelization of the world in the name of Jesus. He is NOT saying that only Christians will be saved. Peter is using extravagant, confessional language to persuade the Sanhedrin to believe; he is not formulating a doctrine of Christian exclusivism. He is NOT postulating a dogma of the uniqueness of Christian salvation. He is trying valiantly in this text to get the leaders of his community to humble themselves, and follow the one in whose power Peter just healed a lame man.⁵

Later Christians who read this text and extracted from it an absolutist claim read it falsely. By false readings of this text, Western European/American Christians have globetrotted, trumpeting Christianity as far superior to any indigenous practices. By false readings of this text, Christians have attempted to destroy religions and people deemed inferior to their own—the most egregious example being the decimation of Native American peoples. By false readings of this text Christians developed a juggernaut that slaughtered millions of Jews and Muslims under the pretext of the Holy Crusades. Exclusivist readings

³ Julia Ching, "No Other Name," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 1985.

⁴ Krister Stendhal, "Three Bible Studies,"

⁵ *Ibid.*

of this verse 12 has led to a scorched-earth-and-take-no-prisoners approach that is antithetical to the spirit of peace who is Christ.⁶ Docile sheep Christians have not been; we as the church have to apologize for such absolute, triumphalist claims that have led to so many deaths and soured too many people away from Christ.

When Peter says in verse 12 that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” he is proclaiming a salvation from systems of domination and power like the Sanhedrin.⁷ He is trying to transform the powers of oppression in his society by speaking right to them, and offering them a greater source of freedom than their rule can ever provide. Peter isn’t thinking here about other world religions or tolerance; he is proclaiming his experience of Christ’s grace, and trying to offer that to the very people who would kill him. Peter is trying to offer the most inclusive acceptance he’s ever known ; he is trying to give an opportunity for new life in Christ to those in power.

To their credit, the Sanhedrin at least listened to Peter. More than that, they were impressed. The scripture says that they were “amazed.” These humble fisherman, whom the Sanhedrin had considered uneducated—the Greek work used is *idiotai*, or idiots—had just given the best trial defense they had ever heard. An unlikely commoner had stupefied the highest court in the land. The Sanhedrin had no argument in response; they let Peter and John go from prison. Through the power of Jesus, an uneducated commoner turned the ranking and hierarchy of his world upside down. A courageous sheep, indeed.

IV. We as Courageous Sheep

A. Speak Truth to Power

⁶ Wink, “Those Obstreperous Idiots”.

⁷ Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 63.

Peter's example urges us to be courageous as well in two central ways. First, Peter exemplifies speaking truth to power. In the spirit of Christ, who preached the Beatitudes to the marginalized and proclaimed that the last shall be first, Peter urges the powerful to submit to salvation in Christ. He boldly spoke to the domination system of his day to offer them freedom in Jesus.

Peter's boldness calls us to speak out to domination systems in our own day. In the not so distant past in South Africa, many black South Africans spoke boldly against their domination system. Walter Wink, in his book *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* says that "Blacks struggling against apartheid in South Africa were fully aware that they were fighting not white people, but a whole (domination) system. When police were at the door, people inside would warn, "The System is here. When they would see propaganda on television they would quip, "The System is lying again."⁸ From biased racial relations to patriarchal gender relations to oppressive politics to unjust economics, Peter's example calls us forth as Christians to be courageous and bold in naming unjust powers.

B. Divest of our own false selves

Secondly, Peter's example calls us to examine our own tendencies to find our status in false titles, rather than in Christ alone. The Sadducees and members of the Sanhedrin had such a hard time accepting Christ because they found their value in their social status, rather than in Jesus alone. Their whole system of domination over others came in part because they had never learned to value who they were apart from their pompous robes and prominent pedigrees. They put others down so they could feel better about their insecure selves.

⁸ Ibid, 39.

Such tendencies to value false selves continue today. Many retirees, once they lose their title as so- and so in such-and-such company, struggle to know who they are anymore. People can struggle with losing rank, status, or vocation. Peter reminds us that all those titles are really false selves anyway. Our power comes not from a title after or before our name, but from the name of Jesus Christ. Our true self comes from accepting Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of our lives. In Christ is our true value. No other name under heaven gives us more infinite worth than Jesus Christ, by which we are saved. Thanks be to God. Amen.

*Ask for prayer requests

Prayer:

O God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles like Peter, with Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. Save the community of your people from seeking worldly power and from building systems of domination out of our insecurity. For the unity of the Church we pray, and for fellowship across the embittered lines of race, gender, and nation, that we might grow in grace, build in love, enlarge in service, increase in wisdom, faith, and charity.

We pray especially for the United Methodist General Conference, taking place as we speak. May we be a church that truly proclaims with love the name of Jesus Christ, rather than any false titles for ourselves. May we be a church that works against systems of domination. May the decisions made at General Conference enable us to uphold the power of Christ, rather than any of our own attempts at power. May we be faithful

We pray for those in our church in Special need of Christ's presence (names on prayer list and any new names)