

Psalm 42:5-8 and Matthew 26:31-46

“Jesus, the shepherd of the world”

Last Sunday I went up to the Stroudsburg area to go out into the woods and see if there were any antlered deer that I might be able to bring home for Christmas. We were basically in the back yard of the house that a member of our church grew up in. It wasn't that large of a wooded area, maybe 300 yards wide with a field on either side. It got to be around 5pm and Tim Ott, I mean the member of the church came to get me out of my tree stand and we were going to go back to walk back to his brother's house which was close to the tree stand where he had been earlier in the day. Let's walk along the field, he says, because there is a path there that leads right to the stand and then there is a path there that leads to his brother's house.

Not a bad plan, it was getting dark, it wasn't dark quite yet, so we walked along the field and couldn't quite find the path that was a very clear path during the day. I was convinced that we hadn't gone far enough, but he knew the area and was equally convinced that we had gone too far. We started over again looking for this path right off the field, this time I went further than before, and again, he said, not, too far. It was dark by now, we weren't lost yet, because we were on the edge of the field, so I came up with the idea that from my stand I could see his brother's stand where he had been earlier through the woods, so let's walk through the woods in the pitch black on the straight line that would take us to his brother's stand.

We walked through what became a bog toward this stand that would lead us to the path to his brother's house. We never found the stand, again, a few times we weren't in full agreement as to whether we had gone far enough or not, with Tim being convinced we had gone too far, and me convinced that we hadn't gone far enough. After about a few hours wandering around, Tim remembered that there was a field of reeds where the path led and if we found the field of reeds we could easily find the path. We wandered looking for reeds, never finding them, but by now the bog had become a swamp with mosquitoes that were able to brave temperatures in the teens.

It was at this point that we realized we needed help to get to his brothers house, he calls his brother and says he was lost. His brother comes and gets us, takes us to the stand where Tim's backpack was, we had not gone far enough, and then takes us back to his house and his car. We were each convinced that if we had just spent a little more time and a little more effort we would be able to find what we were looking for on our own, even if we were stumbling around in the dark. But then it came to the point where we both realized we needed help.

Once we called for help, once we asked for help, then it was so easy, he picked us up in his car and we ended up where we needed to be. I wish I could be a fly on the wall at Christmas as the Tim's brothers tell the story of him getting lost with his pastor in the back yard of where they grew up. But it became easy once we were willing to succumb to the realization that we can't do this on our own, put away our desire to do it ourselves, which both of us were absolutely determined to do.

Today, this third Sunday in Advent we find ourselves again in Matthew as we look at Jesus the Shepherd. We saw three weeks ago Jesus, the light of the world, last week Jesus the bread of the world, and today, Jesus the shepherd of the world. He, as our shepherd is willing to lead us and guide us if we would only let him. But that is the catch isn't it, each one of us thinks we can figure it out on our own as we stumble around in the dark, until we get to a point where we call out for help. Obedience to the shepherd is key to our faith journey. Jesus gave us the road map for that obedience in his own obedience in his life. Let's read.

READ

The Bible is filled with times when we see the humanity of Jesus. But even as we see it we tend to push back against it. Christmas is a great example of seeing Jesus as fully human, but we push back against that as well. Away in the manger tells us that Jesus as a baby, no crying he makes. Why would we say that? Because we are afraid to envision a Savior who cries. We see Jesus weeping for the death of his friend Lazarus, we see Jesus angry as he turns over the tables in the temple, we can imagine Jesus smiling and laughing as the parents bring the children to him. Jesus was one of us in all of his emotions and all of his feelings and in all of his joys in life. We shouldn't be afraid of that.

Today we see Jesus afraid, yes, afraid, and probably a piece of Jesus' humanity that makes him more like us than anything else we find in Scripture. We find Jesus in a struggle for obedience, but he chooses the side of obedience, even if he knew the road that it would lead him toward, which was suffering and death. Obedience for Jesus in our Scripture today demands that he choose the road that leads to suffering and death. You see, this is why it is hard for us to follow this example, because when we are faced with a choice between obeying God which leads to suffering and death, or obeying that which the voices of culture tells us, your life is about you and you are the most important thing in the world, well the latter sounds pretty good doesn't it? A whole lot better than obedience that leads to suffering and death.

We find Jesus with his disciples after the Last Supper and they leave Jerusalem and make their way out of the city down a valley and into what John calls a garden. Gethsemane means literally an olive press, so it was the garden of Gethsemane, a garden filled with olive trees. Keep in mind the chaos that Jerusalem and the surrounding areas was during this time. We normally envision Jesus with his disciples all by themselves in the quiet of the night. No, it was a chaotic scene with people everywhere. But he asks his disciples to be close to him this evening. Then he takes his inner circle, Peter, James, and John, and asks them to pray with him and for him this evening, because he had a difficult night ahead of him.

Jesus needs his people around him as he is deciding what to do next. He prays and look at his prayer he asks that this cup be removed for him. We clearly see that he does not want to suffer and die, he doesn't look forward to suffering and dying, if he had to choose, he would do something else. Well, he actually does have to choose, and he knows that the will of the Father for him, if it is to be done, it is not possible to avoid the cross. This was not an easy decision for him. Here we see that he is grieved making this decision even to the point of death. In Luke we read that he sweat drops of blood he was so anxious about what was coming up. Afraid, anxious, sweating, crying out, falling on his face. None of these things do we normally associate with Jesus, but why not, it happens to us, doesn't it?

God wants obedience and things just work better when we obey. But we know what it is like to have a decision in front of us and we know what the right thing to do is, but if we make the right decision then maybe a part of us we feel will lose out. Peter himself says that no matter what he will obey Jesus and will never abandon him. But when he is faced with potential death in obedience, or betrayal with a simple denial, he chooses the denial because the alternative is too hard to fathom.

Jesus says the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Paul says in Romans 7:15 that we are of the flesh, I don't understand my actions, he says, I do not do the thing that I want but the very thing that I hate. This happens when we disobey God and what we want should align with God, but the cost of doing it seems too high. Jesus' obedience here in Matthew is our guide to how to follow the shepherd even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Some have called the Garden of Gethsemane the opposite of the Garden of Eden. In the Garden of Eden we were faced with a decision to whether obey God or not. We see that the decision we made was not to obey, but rather to keep trying to figure things out on our own until

it led to sin which separates us from God. Paul says in Romans 5:18 Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.

Jesus chose to obey, as Philippians 2:8 tells us: he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death. We struggle with obedience, don't we. When I say we, I mean we as adults. We live in a country and in a culture that almost demands that our life reflects a pursuit of happiness no matter what the cost. We are told the most important thing is that our desires are met, is that our needs are met, is that our families are safe, is that our children get what they need, and the list goes on and on with us at the center, and everything and everyone else secondary. Following the shepherd means obedience, and obedience means that we are willing to give up our thinking that we have to look out for ourselves and our families at all costs.

We think it is up to us, but it isn't. At any moment, our lives can be required of us. The messaging around us is so individualized and takes us away from one of the central messages of the Gospel that in following we are called to recognize that those around us as just as important as we are. The disciples, like us, despite their best intentions, will not be able to be true to their deepest convictions. When we are faced with anxiety and stress in our life, we will tend to not obey. When obedience looks like giving something up, we will not do it. Peter did it, all of the disciples scattered when Jesus is arrested. There was too much to give up.

Today, we are told in this Scripture that we are called to always follow the shepherd. We know that we ought to but our flesh leads us away. Jesus predicts in this passage that the faith of the disciples will be compromised when Jesus is arrested. I believe that both tremendous stress, and tremendous routine can chip away at our faith and cause us to rely more and more upon ourselves and less and less upon the shepherd whose goal is not to keep us safe, but to keep us faithful.

In the figure of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, we see our shepherd in his full humanity. It gives us the full model that ordinary Christians can follow. Not my will be done, but yours. Our task is to pray earnestly and frequently that our wills be aligned with the will of the Father, just as Jesus did. Amen.