

Welcome

Let's talk about how you manipulate people with religion! (I know... I just made it weird. Bear with me!)

My first vocational ministry job was as a youth pastor. There was a local summer camp the church attended every year, so my first year on staff at that Church, I took my teens to the summer camp. As a youth minister at summer camp, you spend a lot of time hanging out behind the scenes, so it wasn't terribly surprising that I overheard a conversation that made me a little sick to my stomach.

It was probably halfway through the week, and one of the adult volunteers was talking with the worship leader for the week. Apparently, he didn't think the week was going very well because he said, "This week hasn't been very spiritual so far. I think tonight we should do an altar call, to really punch it up."

If you never attended an Evangelical summer camp and aren't familiar with the 'altar call' phenomenon there, let me explain it to you:

You play some music, usually at the end of a long worship service. Often the message has been particularly emotional. The pastor will invite people to come forward to make decisions - for salvation, calls to ministry, life changes, etc.

I want to be careful not to denigrate *all* altar call experiences. Having a particular moment to mark an important faith decision is invaluable - I received my own call to ministry in an altar call experience, and I know many wonderful people who can point to an altar experience as when they said Yes to Jesus' invitation to faith.

But altar calls can also be incredibly manipulative, as that summer camp experience demonstrates. I've **also** met plenty of pastors and leaders who use the high emotion of the altar call moment to manipulate people into making decisions they're not ready for or haven't considered fully.

In fact, the altar call experience is a pretty good microcosm of the problems with religion in general: there's something good, beautiful and true about religion that welcomes the outsider, lifts up the downtrodden, gives voice to the silenced.

But there's a reason Karl Marx described religion as the 'opiate of the masses' - too often religion becomes a tool of oppression, supporting those in power and silencing those who dare oppose them.

So today, we're going to talk about religious leaders and how we can learn to spot the rotten ones. We're going to talk about what seeking that beautiful religion looks like, and we'll see that Jesus is actually much closer to us than we ever imagined, inviting us to follow him into new life right where we are.

Message

In this season after Easter, we're working through the "I Am" statements Jesus made in the Gospel of John. "I Am" is a translation of Yahweh, the name of God. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus makes it clear he's God by calling himself "I Am". But he also makes statements like "I am the Way" or "I am the resurrection" to reveal what it means that he is God.

Our series is called "Monday Messiah" because what Jesus reveals to us about his godhood. Jesus came not just for our religious experiences - our Sunday mornings. He came for our everyday lives. That's why he uses images like sheep, vines and bread - though they're strange to us, they were part of the everyday lives of Israel. So we're asking how Jesus matters in our everyday lives. What difference does Jesus make on *Monday*?

[Scripture Slide] Today, Jesus claims to be the 'Good Shepherd'. This is one of images that's much less familiar to us than it would've been to his listeners. If we're familiar with anything down here in Texas, it's cows - and cows and sheep are very different. Cowboys and cowgirls drive cattle from behind. You can shout and prod cows, and just sort of herd them where you want them to go. But if you try that with sheep, they all just run behind you.

Because sheep want to follow someone. Talk to a shepherd and they'll tell you the sheep come to know them. Sheep - sort of like dogs - develop a relationship with the shepherds and will only follow shepherds they trust.

The events of John 9 triggered Jesus' speech here in John 10. In John 9, Jesus encountered a man who had been born blind. Jesus healed the man by making mud, putting it on the man's face and telling him to go wash. When the man washed the mud from his face, he found he could see - but Jesus was nowhere to be found.

This healing caused a huge controversy because people were trying to figure out whether Jesus was really God or not. The man had a pretty simple take: Jesus healed me... he has to be God! But that belief put him into conflict with the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They refused to believe Jesus was God, and even questioned whether the man had really been born blind. They throw the man out of the synagogue.

When Jesus gets word, he finds the man - who, remember, hadn't *seen* Jesus yet. The guy asks Jesus if he knows Jesus and Jesus speaks to him, revealing himself to the man.

Some more religious leaders are standing nearby, and they get irritated that Jesus is claiming to speak for God, so they challenge Jesus.

Our text for today is Jesus' response to these religious leaders. In framing his response, Jesus is drawing on the prophet Ezekiel, who faced his own corrupt religious leaders in his day. Here's what Ezekiel said:

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from the Sovereign LORD: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal...

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search and find my sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock. I will find my sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day. -- Ezekiel 34:2-5, 11-12

Ezekiel envisioned a day when God would become the True Shepherd, a Good Shepherd to stand against all these evil leaders who don't care about the people in their care, but only fend for themselves. With that in mind, let's read Jesus' words to these Pharisees who have thrown the healed man out of the synagogue:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep.

"I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.

"The Father loves me because I sacrifice my life so I may take it back again. No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again. For this is what my Father has commanded." -- John 10:11-18

Jesus claims he is the good shepherd and his very death proves it. While the evil shepherds spend their time taking care of themselves, exploiting the sheep for their own good, using their power to manipulate their sheep for their own ends, Jesus dies for his sheep.

And, just as the blind man knew Jesus by his voice, so will all of Jesus' sheep learn to recognize the voice of their shepherd, the one who gave them new life.

This is the essential truth everyone who follows Jesus must cling to: Jesus gave up his very life for us, to open the way to God's new reality and invite us into relationship with him.

If anyone offers something else, if anyone uses faith or the appearance of faith to manipulate us into anything else, it's a false religion. Paul warned the churches he planted in Galatia

Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you. I say again what we have said before: If anyone preaches any other Good News than the one you welcomed, let that person be cursed. -- Galatians 1:8-9

If anyone - even a pastor or church leader or someone claiming to be an angel! - offers something that doesn't look like Jesus' death and resurrection, it's false.

For the man born blind, it was a system that refused to believe God could work without the permission of the gatekeepers. For the churches in Galatia, it was a kind of legalism that said salvation was found in working hard enough to earn God's favor. Today, it takes many forms, from pastors flying around in private jets while their congregants struggle to make ends meet to using religion to manipulate people's emotions and behavior for status or numbers.

What they all have in common is a desire to *control*. These evil shepherds want the sheep to listen to *their* voices instead of Jesus'.

It makes sense: If you rely on *me* for your information about who God is, what God wants, then I have a lot of power over you.

But Jesus claims here *he* is the Good Shepherd, that he speaks to his sheep and that his sheep can hear him, learn to recognize his voice and follow him. We call this the 'priesthood of all believers' - it essentially means we all have the same access to Jesus. We don't need a priest or pastor to connect with God for us.

Friends, I understand *why* religion gets turned into a tool for manipulation. We're told God is disgusted by us, so why would he speak to us? And frankly, it's work to be responsible for our own faith. It's *easier* to outsource it to a pastor.

But Jesus comes to each of us, calls us his own. He speaks to us in ways we can learn to hear and understand.

One of the ways the Church has long practiced listening for Jesus' voice is through a way of reading the Bible called a sacred reading. This is a way of reading that is less about learning new information than it is about allowing God to speak to us and transform us.

We're going to practice doing a sacred reading together today using Psalm 23 - a song about God the Good Shepherd.

[Explanation of Sacred Reading]

Sacred Reading of Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd;

I have all that I need.

He lets me rest in green meadows;

he leads me beside peaceful streams.

He renews my strength.

He guides me along right paths,

bringing honor to his name.

Even when I walk

through the darkest valley,

I will not be afraid,

for you are close beside me.

Your rod and your staff

protect and comfort me.

You prepare a feast for me

in the presence of my enemies.

You honor me by anointing my head with oil.

My cup overflows with blessings.

Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me

all the days of my life,

and I will live in the house of the LORD

forever. -- Psalm 23 (NLT)

GOD, my shepherd!

I don't need a thing.

You have bedded me down in lush meadows,

you find me quiet pools to drink from.

True to your word,

you let me catch my breath

and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through

Death Valley,

I'm not afraid

when you walk at my side.

Your trusty shepherd's crook

makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of GOD
for the rest of my life. -- Psalm 23 (The Message)

The Eternal is my shepherd, He cares for me always.
He provides me rest in rich, green fields
beside streams of refreshing water.
He soothes my fears;
He makes me whole again,
steering me off worn, hard paths
to roads where truth and righteousness echo His name.
Even in the unending shadows of death's darkness,
I am not overcome by fear.
Because You are with me in those dark moments,
near with Your protection and guidance,
I am comforted.
You spread out a table before me,
provisions in the midst of attack from my enemies;
You care for all my needs, anointing my head with soothing, fragrant oil,
filling my cup again and again with Your grace.
Certainly Your faithful protection and loving provision will pursue me
where I go, always, everywhere.
I will always be with the Eternal,
in Your house forever. -- Psalm 23 (The Voice)

Communion

[Communion Slide] Jesus leads us to the Communion Table, where he proves his trustworthiness as our shepherd. We follow him, trusting his goodness.

Assignment/Blessing

Sacred Reading Challenge --> What is Jesus saying to YOU?