

GOOD SHEPHERDING
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Let's talk about good shepherding this morning. For the reading from Jeremiahⁱ has God crying out, "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" God explains that he will bring the sheep back to their fold, where they shall be fruitful and multiply. And then God says, "I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing." The context is the time of the exile of many Jews to Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. The prophet Jeremiah foresees the return of at least a remnant of those Jews to Jerusalem and the surrounding country. The shepherds of whom he speaks are Israelite kings,ⁱⁱ bad and good. It's said that the days are coming when a new king, in the line of David, will come to reign wisely, executing justice and righteousness in the land. Of course, Christians see Jesus as that new king in David's line, and he's referred to by the gospel writer John as the good shepherd.ⁱⁱⁱ As Jesus is quoted there, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."^{iv} Then, the reading in today's lectionary from Luke^v describes Jesus as laying down his own life as he's crucified, with an inscription over him reading, "This is the King of the Jews." Jesus, as the good

shepherd, is depicted as concerned even about those who are doing him such grievous, fatal harm: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Shepherds are ubiquitous in the Bible, from David as the young shepherd who kills Goliath to the shepherds who view Jesus lying in a manger. God himself is described as a shepherd, most famously in the twenty-third psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.”^{vi}

Good shepherding, then, both for God and for his son Jesus, seems to imply universal salvation for all people. How can any Christians ever have thought, or think now, that certain sheep will be condemned to everlasting flames? Will the good shepherd, who will even go so far as to lay down his life for his sheep, knowingly let even one of them go? Will the unconditionally loving God of the universe fail to rescue all of us from going over the edge, falling into the pit, and getting caught in briars forever? The same God who Jeremiah quotes as saying, “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture” assures us “I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing.” Nor shall any be missing.

Given the strength of the shepherd imagery, both for Jesus and for God, I've always been baffled by the conservative Christian claim that only a certain number of us will ultimately be saved, and the rest of us will be cast by God into the fires of hell

for all eternity. And yet, as I've explained before from this pulpit, a well-known Christian evangelical, John Stott, author of more than 40 books, respected for his intellectual depth as well as his religious fervor,^{vii} ranked by *Time* magazine in 2005 as one of the 100 most influential people in the world,^{viii} has written: "It is false to suppose that sinners can be saved through other systems" apart from the Christian gospel.^{ix} In a fascinating book called *Evangelical Essentials*, published by the conservative InterVarsity Press, John Stott engages in a dialogue with a liberal Christian scholar, David Edwards, on key theological differences between evangelicals and liberal Christians. Edwards references the biblical imagery of God as shepherd as he challenges Evangelicals to "say something good about humanity's future in the hands of the Creator who is also revealed as the Father... God never gives up. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, the lost criminal is found."^x

Stott's response is that "the doctrine of God as a universal Father was not taught by Christ nor by his apostles... [H]e is the Father only of our Lord Jesus Christ and of those whom he adopts into his family through Christ."^{xi} Edwards asks, "Must the message of Christians include hell fire if it is to be faithful to the message of Jesus?"^{xii} Edward's hope, instead, based on his reading of the Bible, is "that all will be saved ultimately...For according to Christianity God is both all-powerful...and all-loving...[W]ill he not exert his infinite power to the utmost to save all...?"^{xiii} Here's Stott's response: "[T]here is no need for me to say more than that the hope of final salvation for everyone is a false hope, since it contradicts the recorded warnings of

Jesus that the judgment will involve a separation into two opposite but equally eternal destinies.^{xiv}

You may be asking about the word "saved" or "salvation". Does it really have any relevance anyway to those of us who have doubts about the afterlife? A divinity school professor of mine, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, used to define "salvation" or "being saved" as having the ability to perceive our current life as meaningful, in contrast to nihilism and ultimate despair.^{xv} To be "saved" means not to be lost to alienation or anomie.^{xvi}

But the position of many, many Christian churches in America, especially those that are Evangelical in orientation, is emphatic that not all people will be saved, in this world or the next. In particular, those who have heard of Jesus Christ and don't accept him uniquely as God and as their Lord and Savior will not be saved. They will be condemned eternally to hell, and a feeling of being in hell may well start in this earthly life.

Let's return for a moment to what it meant to be a shepherd in the Bible. For shepherding practices in ancient Palestine differed in some significant ways from modern practices: "Sheep were not continually fenced in and left to fend for themselves. Instead, they were totally dependent on shepherds for protection, grazing, watering, shelter, and tending to injuries. In fact, sheep would not survive long without a shepherd... [A] good shepherd...in the Bible is a case study in care and compassion. It was the task of a shepherd to lead sheep from nighttime protection in a

sheepfold on safe paths to places of grazing and watering. After morning grazing and watering, sheep typically [would] lie down for several hours at midday in a shady or cool place... To protect sheep against predators, shepherds would carry two pieces of equipment, the 'rod and staff' of Psalm 23 -- one of them a club like weapon and the other the familiar crook used for...rescue... Shepherds were thus providers, guides, protectors and constant companions of sheep."^{xvii}

Not only that, but shepherds were concerned about each and every individual sheep, no matter how far it had gone astray or become crippled or sick or weak or lost. It's not surprising, then, that these are the kind of biblical images we get of God as shepherd: According to the prophet Ezekiel, when God brings the Israelites back from their exile in other countries where they are scattered, God will act as a shepherd in seeking out the lost, bringing back the strayed, binding up the injured, and strengthening the weak.^{xviii} According to the prophet Isaiah, God will feed his human flock like a shepherd; metaphorically, he will gather up young lambs and carry them in his arms, as he gently leads the mother sheep.^{xix}

Now, it's only fair to say that there are apparently contrary texts that evangelicals can rely for their own, differing biblical interpretation. For example, in the passage from Ezekiel, after God describes binding up the injured and strengthening weak people, he says: "[B]ut the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice."^{xx} At the end of the gospel of Matthew, within days of his crucifixion,^{xxi} Jesus tells his disciples that when the Son of Man comes back in all his

glory, "he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. All of the sheep will inherit the kingdom of God, but the goats will be told "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Goats, by the way, are often associated with sin in the Bible,^{xxii} and in many traditions throughout history they've been connected with the netherworld. In Germanic and Slavic folklore, for example, the Devil has goat's hooves.^{xxiii}

But, the main image of God as shepherd throughout both the Old and the New Testaments, I would claim, is of one who prepares a table for all of us, even in the presence of our enemies, of one who anoints our head with oil, who fills our cups to running over, and who then convinces each of us, sinful and lost as we may be, that "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."^{xxiv}

In 1979 Pope John Paul II wrote in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*: "Man -- every man without any exception whatever -- has been redeemed by Christ, and ...with each man without any exception whatever -- Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it." The evangelical John Stott explicitly disagrees with the Pope's statement. He retorts, "That kind of unconditional universalism must ... be firmly rejected by those who look to Scripture for authoritative guidance."^{xxv} However, Stott admits that there are a number of "apparently universalistic" texts in the Bible,^{xxvi} and even Stott seems to want to move personally in the direction of seeing God (and, of course Jesus) as the good shepherd who wants to save all people.

Near the very end of the book *Evangelical Essentials* Stott says this: "[W]e need to remember that God is the Creator of all humankind, and remains infinitely loving, patient, and compassionate toward all whom he has made. Yes, and he is also everybody's 'Father'...in the sense that he continues to yearn for his lost children, as in the parable of the prodigal son... We have to remember too that God does not *want* anybody to perish, but *wants* everyone to be saved...that Jesus expressed his compassion for society's outcasts (the 'publicans and sinners' and the prostitutes), refused to reject them, and deliberately made friends with them... This is the hope I cherish, and that is the vision that inspires me..."^{xxvii}

Rob Bell, an evangelical pastor, founder of the Mars Hills megachurch in Michigan, and author of the best-selling book *Love Wins*, reminds us that when Jesus says, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," as he hang on the cross, "Jesus forgives them all, without their asking for it. Done. Taken care of. Before we could be good enough or right enough, before we could even believe the right things. Forgiveness is unilateral. God isn't waiting for us to get it together, to clean up, shape up, get up – God has already done it."^{xxviii}

As Jeremiah reminds us, good shepherding means that none of us shall fear any longer, nor be dismayed, nor shall any of us be missing. For evangelicals and liberals, may Jesus reign throughout all the earth, now and always, for "Blessings abound where'er Christ reigns, the prisoners leap to lose their chains, the weary find eternal rest, and all who suffer want are blessed."^{xxix}

BENEDICTION

(The benediction today is taken from the words
of 18th century Universalist preacher John Murray:)

Go out into the highways and by-ways.
Give people something of your new vision.
You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine.
Use it to bring more light and understanding
 to the hearts and minds of men and women.
Give them not hell, but hope and courage.
Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God. AMEN.

NOTES

ⁱ Jeremiah 23: 1-6.

ⁱⁱ Harold W. Attridge (ed.), *HarperCollins Study Bible* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), p. 1040.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 10: 11, 14.

^{iv} John 10: 11.

^v Luke 23: 33-43.

^{vi} Psalm 23: 1-2.

^{vii} John Stott biography at www.lanhampartnership.org/john-stott/biography/

^{viii} See www.time.com/time/subscriber/2005/time100/heroes/100stott.html

^{ix} David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 288.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 305.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 293.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 287.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 295.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 319.

^{xv} Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 114.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 168.

^{xvii} Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 782.

^{xviii} See Ezekiel 24: 11-31.

^{xix} Isaiah 40:11.

^{xx} Ezekiel 34:16.

^{xxi} See Matthew 25: 31-46.

^{xxii} Lyken, *Dictionary*, p. 332.

^{xxiii} Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 2nd Edition, Vol. 12, p. 8412.

^{xxiv} Psalm 23: 5-6 (King James Bible version).

^{xxv} Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, p. 325.

^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, p. 319.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, p. 328.

^{xxviii} Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), pp. 188-189.

^{xxix} Isaac Watts, "Jesus Shall Reign" (1719).