



Texts in Context

“Shepherd My Sheep”: Preaching for the Sake of Greater Works than These

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It is hard to imagine how the automobile might have an impact on interpreting texts for preaching, for it is certainly not a typical lens through which to read the Bible into the pulpit. But as preaching is also about interpreting the lives of our parishioners, the interaction of car and congregation, of transportation and transformative proclamation, is an important reminder of how the Bible and our preaching must intersect daily living in meaningful ways. For indeed, the advent of and reliance on the automobile has had an extraordinary effect on how we go about our lives and our daily work. We would benefit from sustained reflection on how this influences our life and work of faith as well.

The focus of this issue of *Word & World* also raises the question of how we preach the Bible or word of God when invention and technology create ever further distance between us and the world of Scripture. Where do we find points of transference and moments of meaning in the biblical text so that our sermons take life in the lives of our people? As we drive around in the privacy, privilege, and convenience of our automobiles, how do we engage narratives that tell of travel from Judea to Galilee by foot, or from Tiberias to Capernaum by boat? How do we relate to the work of discipleship, of apostleship, of fishermen, tradespeople, and tent-

The conversation between Jesus and Peter in John 21:15–19 highlights Peter’s work as an apostle but also reveals our own call to care for the sheep—as Jesus says, to “do the works that I do.” The text offers an opportunity to preach about Christian vocation and daily life.

makers, when our own work is most often subject to a means of travel upon which we are absolutely reliant and which distances us even more from those first believers? Can Jesus really be in the midst of cubicles, factories, classrooms, offices, and business trips, and does it *really* matter if he is?

JOHN 21 AND THE CHURCH’S PREACHING

Perhaps one way forward might call attention to texts that actually describe the daily work of early believers or that narrate the new work to which they were called by the living and resurrected Jesus. Summer might offer preachers the opportunity to turn to such texts in a service (or series) devoted to vocation and daily life. One such biblical text is John 21:15–19. The episode recounts Jesus’ appearance to the disciples as they return to their daily work as fishermen, yet, in the conversation between Jesus and Peter, Jesus charges Peter with new work, the very act of shepherding Jesus’ sheep.

While many scholars view chapter 21 as an epilogue, supplement, or appendix to the Gospel proper, there is no manuscript evidence to indicate that the Gospel was circulated without chapter 21.¹ In fact, there are compelling reasons to note the importance of this chapter for the interpretation of John and the church’s preaching, the least of which are the critical last words that make up the ending to the Gospel: “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:24–25).² As a whole, chapter 21 of the Fourth Gospel situates us in the postincarnation, postcrucifixion, postresurrection, and soon postascension daily-ness of life as Jesus’ disciples. As the disciples go about their usual business and busy-ness of daily living, Jesus appears to them and interacts with them, not for the sake of commissioning (Matt 28:19–20) or for self-interpretation (Luke 24:27), but to remind them of the necessities of daily work and life, and of Jesus’ presence even here: “‘Children, you have no fish, have you?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ He said to them, ‘Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some’” (21:5–7); “‘Come and have breakfast’” (21:12).

Another argument for the critical role of chapter 21 in the Fourth Gospel is the report of the extraordinary catch of fish, 153 to be exact, when the previous night’s fishing had resulted in no catch at all. While such a pedantic account of the fishing expedition may initially appear anticlimactic compared to the miraculous signs that Jesus performs in chapters 1–11, the quantity of fish is yet another exam-

¹For discussion on the narrative relationship between chapter 21 and the rest of the Gospel, see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 395–398; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 1077–1082. But see Paul S. Minear, “The Original Functions of John 21,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102/1 (1983) 85–98, who challenges this conventional position.

²A number of scholars argue that the fitting conclusion to the Gospel is 20:30–31: for example, Adele Reinhartz, *The Word in the World: The Cosmological Tale in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992) 13.

ple of the abundance that Jesus provides.³ It is important to recognize that for this Gospel, abundance, and indeed abundant life, is not only eternal life (14:1–4), but the life that one lives in the presence of the revelation of God in Jesus, both in his earthly ministry and in his ongoing presence because of the sending of the Paraclete (14:26; 16:7–15). Jesus’ claim, “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), is testimony to this very reality. The life that Jesus gives is resurrected life, but even more so, abundance and life abundant in the present because of believing in him.

A third compelling reason for taking seriously the last chapter of the Gospel of John is the moving interaction between Jesus and Peter in 21:15–19 that does not simply redeem Peter of his denial, but befriends him in the work of the Word made flesh (15:14–17). Jesus chooses Peter and entrusts him with the care of Jesus’ own and, in doing so, correlates faith and life, belief and work out of the theological claim that if we take the incarnation seriously, we cannot separate what we do from who we are.

“SHEPHERD MY SHEEP”

In 21:15–19, there is a threefold question-and-answer session between Jesus and Peter that most scholars recognize as recalling Peter’s threefold denial of Jesus (18:15–27). As a result, this scene in the last chapter of the Gospel is often viewed as Peter’s moment of redemption or rehabilitation for abandoning Jesus. There is more to the story, however, when interpreted from the perspective of what Peter is being asked to do. The conversation repeats a threefold pattern: the question by Jesus to Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”; Peter’s response to Jesus, “Lord, you know that I love you”; and Jesus’ instructions to Peter to take care of his sheep (21:15–17). It is not enough to locate Peter’s restoration in the conversation itself. The narrative appears neither to conclude that Peter’s new calling completely wipes out his betrayal⁴ nor even to be concerned with the issue. Rather, this passage suggests the striking claim that Jesus is less interested in *belief* as the sureness of future life with Jesus and the Father than he is interested in *believing* as the very present working out of what life means now because of the incarnated presence of Jesus sent from the Father.⁵ For the words exchanged between Jesus and Peter are the narrative embodiment of Jesus’ words to his disciples in the Farewell Discourse, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (14:12).

Another passage to which 21:15–19 seems to be connected in a mutual textual

³This is a critical theme for this Gospel, which is introduced in the prologue, “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (1:16). “Grace upon grace” is then worked out in the narrative (although the term χάρις is not used again in the Gospel after the prologue), e.g., wine (2:1–11), water (4:14), life (10:10).

⁴So Francis J. Moloney, *Glory Not Dishonor: Reading John 13–21* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 186.

⁵This claim is also reinforced by the fact that *belief* in the Fourth Gospel is never a noun (πίστις), but always a verb (πιστεύω).

relationship is 9:39–10:21, the “Shepherd Discourse.”⁶ There are several aspects of the conversation between Jesus and Peter that echo the Shepherd Discourse. First, there are repetitions of terms and motifs between the episodes. The use of ποιμαίνω (to shepherd) in 21:16 echoes the image of the shepherd in the discourse of 9:39–10:21. This singular occurrence of ποιμαίνω in the Gospel in 21:16 and the fact that ποιμήν (shepherd) is only used in the Shepherd Discourse (10:2, 11, 12, 14, 16) suggests the need to read these episodes together. ποιμαίνω (to shepherd) is also used with προβάτον (sheep), and so “shepherd my sheep,” echoing the discourse in 9:39–10:21.

Second, the three commands Jesus gives to Peter (feed my lambs, shepherd my sheep, feed my sheep) echo the command Jesus receives from the Father in 10:18.⁷ Introducing ἐντολή (command) in the Shepherd Discourse, in connection with Jesus laying down his life and taking it up again, situates his commands to Peter within 15:12–13, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” In addition, the change to φιλέω (to love) in 21:17 (from ἀγαπάω [also, to love]) echoes φίλος in Jesus’ statement in 15:13 and sets up Peter’s laying down his own life in 21:18–19.⁸ The last command Jesus gives to Peter in this narrative is, “Follow me” (21:19). The use of ἀκολουθέω (to follow) in 21:19 echoes the Shepherd Discourse that connects ἀκολουθέω and “sheep” for the first time in the narrative.⁹ That Jesus calls Peter by name three times echoes the discourse where the shepherd calls his sheep by name (10:3).

A change of vocabulary from οἶδα to γινώσκω also links these episodes. In 21:17 both words for “knowing” are used by Peter, “Lord, you know (οἶδα) everything: you know (γινώσκω) that I love you.” The use of the synonyms οἶδα/γινώσκω echoes the change to γινώσκω in the Shepherd Discourse that expresses the intimate relationship between Jesus and his own (10:14). It is after Peter’s own acknowledgment of this intimate relationship between Jesus and his own that Peter is able to hear and Jesus is able to give voice to 21:18–19.

The echoes between the discourse in 9:39–10:21 and the dialogue between Peter and Jesus in 21:15–19 suggest that the reading of the motif of the shepherd and the sheep that recurs in chapter 21 should be shaped by the Shepherd Discourse. The care of the sheep by the shepherd described in chapter 10 foreshadows the conversation between Jesus and Peter. The relationship between the shepherd and the sheep in the discourse provides the thematic basis for discipleship in chapter 21 by supplying the vocabulary and framework of love, knowledge, and care of the sheep embodied in the dialogue by Jesus as shepherd, and Peter as sheep and

⁶While a number of scholars define the “shepherd discourse” as 10:1–18, there is sufficient evidence to argue for the extension of the parameters of the discourse. See Karoline M. Lewis, *Rereading the “Shepherd Discourse”: Restoring the Integrity of John 9:39–10:21* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) 129–132. John 9:39–10:21 is the discourse in which Jesus interprets the sign he has just performed, the healing of the man blind from birth (9:1–38).

⁷John 10:18 is the first time ἐντολή is used in the Gospel.

⁸That 21:18–19 references Peter’s martyrdom is widely held.

⁹ἀκολουθέω occurs in the first discipleship narrative (1:37, 38, 40, 43); the other occurrences include 6:2; 8:12; 10:4, 5, 27; 11:31; 12:26; 13:36, 37; 18:15; 20:6; then in 21:19, 20, 22.

then shepherd. It is from the fundamental relationship between Jesus and “his own,” central to the discourse in 9:39–10:21, that the dialogue between Jesus and Peter is made possible.

At the same time, the interaction between Jesus and Peter in chapter 21 suggests different possibilities for understanding the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep that can give new meaning to the Shepherd Discourse and what it means to do the work of Jesus. The mutual relationship between Jesus and his own in the Shepherd Discourse interpreted from the perspective of chapter 21 suggests that knowing Jesus—being in relationship with Jesus—also means engaging in the same activity as the Shepherd. The mutuality of the shepherd and the sheep moves beyond the recognition of the shepherd to doing the shepherding. This suggests that being in relationship with Jesus is not only following Jesus, as a sheep follows its shepherd, but taking on the shepherding and doing the work and the works that Jesus does.

That Peter is asked to shepherd Jesus’ sheep gives new meaning for following the shepherd in the Shepherd Discourse. Following Jesus the shepherd is not only descriptive of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep but means becoming shepherds, caring for the sheep, and even laying down one’s life for the sheep. Interpreting 10:16 (“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also”) from this perspective suggests that it is not simply about the identity of the other sheep, but about the activity of discipleship itself and the mission of the gospel that is worked out in chapter 21. Jesus as the good shepherd will fulfill the promises of 10:16, not only with his own actions as the good shepherd, but also in the ongoing activity of the shepherd by the disciples—the sheep—toward greater works than these. This changes the reading and meaning of Jesus as the good shepherd because, in this way, the care of the sheep and the abundance of life (10:10) that Jesus promises reach beyond the narrative itself and reveal beforehand the truth of the narrative’s final words: “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:25).

The Shepherd Discourse sets out the dynamics of discipleship and relationship that are critical for the interpretation of chapter 21, where the motif of the shepherd and sheep recurs. When the discourse in John 9:39–10:21 and the dialogue between Jesus and Peter in 21:15–19 are read together in a mutual textual relationship, chapter 21 becomes integral to the Fourth Gospel’s understanding of discipleship. The exchange between Jesus and Peter involves more than Peter’s redemption. It is the narrative fulfillment of what “greater works than these” will look like when Jesus returns to the Father.

PREACHING PETER INTO THE LIVES OF GOD’S PEOPLE

In the final section of this essay, we return to the issues raised at its beginning: How do we connect the church’s preaching to the daily lives of the people in the

pews? How do we bridge the gap between the world of Scripture and the world today when at every turn it seems to get ever wider and ever more impossible to traverse? For in the end, our task is not simply to move from text to sermon, but to move from sermon to life. We will attempt to address these challenges by summarizing the promises of preaching this particular lectionary text, John 21:15–19, but in the process, also cast our net to the wider implications for preaching for the sake of the working people of God and the work of God’s people.

“the work of the apostles for the sake of the church necessitates our own simple participation in that work here and now”

Holding up the conversation between Peter and Jesus to our congregations, especially from the perspective of its relationship to the Shepherd Discourse, offers several possible avenues for preaching that speak directly to the challenges posed above. First, as sheep of Jesus’ fold, we are intimately connected to the work of Peter. Peter’s work is our work. Yes, Peter was apostle to the Jews. Yes, Peter was martyred for the sake of his witness. But this text from John reminds us of something that we assume, but do not always fully comprehend—that the work of the apostles for the sake of the church cannot be left behind in the grandiose narrative of the spread of the gospel, but necessitates our own simple participation in that work here and now. Jesus’ words to Peter remind us that even Peter’s work as apostle, as disciple, had more pressing demands—feeding the sheep. And because of the incarnation, God is invested in and committed to the daily-ness of human existence.

God has chosen to be inseparable from the ordinariness of life, and so the basic needs of Jesus’ sheep need to be met. As Peter returns to his day job, “I am going fishing” (21:2), it is here that Jesus meets him and the disciples. This is part of the challenge of moving from Sunday to Monday for the preacher. In Sunday worship, Jesus comes to us in the miraculous event of his entrance, when our doors are closed in fear (20:19), when we need proof for believing (20:25), and transforms our unbelief to confession (20:28). Yet the next morning we return to our day jobs. John 21 promises Jesus’ appearance again (21:1), that even on Monday morning Jesus will make himself known, and it may even be there, in our offices, at home with the kids, at the computer, that he calls us to follow him, to “come and see” (1:39). Jesus promises that there is abundance in the work we are doing already and that this work to which we are called is for the sake of greater works than these. In the end, who we are, where we are, and what we are doing *is* our calling because of the incarnation. In the incarnation itself, God has made known to us that living life manifests the works of God, that our work is God’s work, that our humanness makes us one with our begotten God.

Second, as sheep of Jesus’ own fold, we carry on this work of apostleship with the absolute certainty of Jesus’ ongoing help and care. There are many ways that the Gospel of John reiterates this truth for Jesus’ own—the theme of abiding

(15:1–17), knowing Jesus (10:14), Jesus’ ongoing presence in the sending of the Spirit, the Paraclete (16:13–15), and unity with Jesus and the Father (17:20–21). But when Jesus’ words to Peter are interpreted with the Shepherd Discourse in view we are to hear the words to Peter as words to us from the protection of the fold. The discourse in 10:1–18 is not directed simply to the Pharisees who remain blind to the revelation of God in Jesus (9:39–41), but is also meant to be heard by the disciples who have witnessed the healing of the blind man as the work of the one who sent Jesus (9:2–5). The sheep remain protected from danger (that is, thieves and robbers) because they are in the fold (10:1–2). The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd when he calls their names (10:3–4). The sheep have life abundantly because Jesus is the door that opens up to pasture (10:7–10). And when it comes time to protect Peter and his disciples again, against the thief who would try and enter in another way,¹⁰ against the forces of this world,¹¹ Jesus brings them into a garden and leaves them there in its security as he himself comes out¹² to meet the one who betrayed him and the accompanying soldiers with their lanterns and torches and weapons (18:1–12).

Jesus’ words to Peter in John 21:15–19 remind us that we are intimately and inseparably connected to Jesus in what we do, and that the work we do is the work that Jesus started (9:4; 14:12). This is not simply following his example, or thinking, “What would Jesus do?” but actual participation in and the embodiment of the work that Jesus did and sends us out to do (17:18; 20:21). We are commanded to do the shepherding of the sheep, but actually, we cannot do otherwise. Jesus calls us by name, not only to follow him, as the sheep that recognize the voice of the shepherd, but also to shepherd the sheep not of this fold (10:16). As sheep who hear Jesus’ voice, we believe and worship (9:38), we are called out of the grave to new life (11:43–44), and we are to go about the work of witness (20:18). We do so with the absolute assurance of the promise of abundance—that indeed, water will be turned to wine, bread will come from heaven, our nets will be full of fish, all for the sake of greater works than these. ⊕

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¹⁰The only other time the word “thief” is used in the Gospel of John, besides the “thieves and robbers” of Jesus’ discourse in 10:1–18, is with reference to Judas (12:6).

¹¹σπεῖρα, which the NRSV translates as a “detachment,” is six hundred or more soldiers. It is the Greek word that translates the Latin “cohors,” and refers specifically to a Roman cohort in our literature.

¹²The NRSV unfortunately translates ἐξέρχουσι as “coming forward” when in 18:1 Jesus and his disciples “entered” the garden. The Fourth Evangelist alone uses the word “garden” (18:1, 26; 19:41). The parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels locate the scene in Gethsemane (Matt 26:36; Mark 14:32) and the more general site of the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39).