

Proper 11B: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### Soundtrack of the Good Shepherd

Living beside railroad tracks as we do, Anna and I have had to make some “allowances” when watching TV—namely, we’ve taken to watching shows and movies with closed captions. This way we don’t miss the dialogue when trains rumble by. Recently though I’ve found another benefit to closed captions on. Not only are the spoken words presented on the screen, but so are the lyrics to the songs playing in the background. Before, I’d mostly ignored the music in shows, but now I appreciate when the lyrics of the songs speak to or cleverly comment on events on screen, such when the song “Crystal Blue Persuasion” plays at the opening of *Breaking Bad*, a show about a guy who makes crystal meth, or when in an episode of *Scrubs*, the song “How to save a life” comes on after a doctor has three patients die on his watch. These songs give a deeper meaning to the on-screen drama.

Reading this morning’s Gospel lesson from Mark, I wish there were closed captions for the story. Because, you see, there is a song playing in the background, a song which, if we tuned into it, gives this story a deeper significance than being just another miracle.

To tune into this song, we need to rewind a bit and consider the story’s context, what has happened leading up to now. Jesus, you’ll recall, sent out the twelve apostles to the towns to proclaim God’s Kingdom, heal the sick and dispel demons. Meanwhile, as we heard last week, Herod, the wanna-be king of the Jews, had John the Baptist killed to make good on a drunken promise. So when the disciples return eager to share their successes, their joy is squashed by the news of the horrible tragedy.

Now, the reason John’s death is so significant, why it hangs over this whole passage, is because John wasn’t just a partner in ministry. He was also was a relative, a cousin to Jesus. And in the honor culture of the Middle East, an attack on a relative is understood as an attack on the whole extended family, and the whole family would be under pressure to respond in a dramatic, perhaps violent way. It’s like if the nephew of a gang leader or mob boss is killed by a rival family—there would have to be ‘an answer.’

Learning of John’s murder, the returning disciples “gathered around” Jesus, Marks says. They were there to show their support and to see what Jesus was going to do. And not only them; “many were coming and going.” It seems everyone was waiting to see how Jesus was going to respond. Likely, there was a good deal of sympathy for Jesus, given what had happened, the wrong that had been done to John and his family. And the people were waiting to hear for themselves what Jesus would do.

Would he try to stir up the people, incite a mob to force Herod from office? Would he join the resistance movement, the Zealots, and fight to remove the Roman authorities who backed Herod’s throne? Or would he petition the Roman authorities themselves, pointing out how Herod

had violated Roman law and brought shame on the entire Roman occupation? Or would he just lay low for a while, till it all blew over?

So what *does* he do? For the moment, nothing. Jesus recognized that now wasn't the time to act. What was needed was to take a step back, take stock, and grieve. The disciples, too, fresh from their mission deployment, needed refreshment, needed to reconnect with God. What they all needed was then to get away, to retreat to some quiet place, far away from the demands of the crowd. So, Jesus sets out with the disciples in a boat for an isolated place on the other side of the lake, a place where only shepherds roam.

Only, when they get there, they discover that “a great crowd” from all the towns ran ahead of them and were waiting when they came ashore. Rather than get angry, though, Jesus “has compassion on them” because, Mark says, “they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Here's where the first notes of the background music start to play.

You see, that phrase, “sheep without a shepherd,” is a riff on lines from prophets like Zechariah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who centuries before blamed Israel's leaders for the nation's downfall. They condemned these leaders for failing in their duties as “shepherds” of their people, for fleecing their flock and devouring the sheep rather than provide for them. Such leaders, the prophets promised, these wolves-in-shepherd's-clothing, *will* get it in the end. As Jeremiah says in our first lesson: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! I [God] will *attend* to you for your evil doings.”

By using this phrase “sheep without a shepherd,” Mark is playing the notes of this song, the prophets' “song of the shepherds.” He's cluing us in to the fact that, not only did Herod do wrong by killing John; he's been judged, exposed as a bad shepherd, like those rulers before him, who cared more about power and reputation than for their people.

A severe assessment, but that's not enough. Something had to be done about Herod, an answer needed to be given. Not out of fear, or desire for revenge, but out of compassion for the scattered flock. So what should Jesus do? Here, it helps to know the next verse of the song. Those same prophets who called out Israel's leaders, also said that God would take charge himself. After God “attends” to the bad shepherds, says Jeremiah, “*then* I [God] will gather the remnant of my flock, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. And I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them” rightly, justly.

For centuries, that promise—of God making things right, coming himself and being their shepherd—remained unfulfilled. But no longer. Jesus was going to make good on that promise, and in the process answer Herod in a way that no one saw coming but which would settle the matter for good.

His response comes in the form of a picnic, a kind of banquet, one which mirrors the banquet Herod hosted, where John was killed, but which at the same time condemns it, showing Herod's rule for the sham it is.

It happens this way. Jesus had been busy teaching the people, feeding their souls, and in the process settling their nerves. The disciples noticed how late it was getting. The sun was setting and stomachs were starting to growl. Problem was, they were far from home, and nowhere near a convenience store or supermarket. The disciples figured that unless Jesus wanted this crowd, which he had spent so much effort talking down to get riled up again, it was time to put a lid on it and send people home.

Jesus had a better idea: “*You* feed them.” The disciples objected: “We don’t have any money.” But Jesus was insistent: “What *do* you have?” “Uh. Five loaves...and two fish.” “That’ll be enough.”

Jesus then has the townspeople all sit down. Mark says they recline “in groups,” *symposia*, *symposia*. Now, *symposium* is the Greek word for a ‘drinking party,’ like the one Herod hosted. But this picnic is no frat party. There is no wine or entertainment, no dancing girls or debauchery. This party was about drawing together, not dissipation.

Mark also says that Jesus “orders” that they sit down—he doesn’t just “tell” them, he “orders” them—as if Jesus were a military general giving orders to his commanders. And the crowd, they sit in groups, in formations of hundreds and fifties, as if they were Roman military units. However, this army isn’t marching or waging war; its reclining, at peace.

So far, the image we get is that Jesus’ “banquet” is a kind of “sober party” and a “peaceful army.” Which can only be taken as a parody, a subtle taunt aimed at Herod:

*You like to party, to throw huge bashes for the rich and powerful? I know how to have a good time too. Heck, I’m the guy who can turn water into wine—it’s a great party trick. But I party with the poor, the non-elite, the ones you don’t want anything to do with.*

*And you think you’re something because you can back up your rule with force, with an army.*

*Well, I can too. I know how to inspire men, know how to command them and organize them, clearly, and I’ve got the manpower too—5000 men, a sizeable army. Only, that’s not what I’m about. I don’t need to throw my weight around with threats of violence, or to impress others with lavish parties. Power, true power, comes not from threats or from sucking up to the rich, but from serving others.*

At this point, notes from the music we heard before, the “song of the shepherds,” stream back in. Only this time, the music is from another song on the album, so to speak. Mark says that Jesus has the townspeople sit “on the green grass.” Or we might say “green *pastures*,” as in “he settles me down in green pasture.” Mark is evoking this psalm, Psalm 23, because he wants us to see it as the theme, the soundtrack for the entire banquet. Its verses frame all that Jesus does here. “He settles me down in green pastures.” He has them sit down on the green grass. “You spread a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” The shadow of the Herod threat hangs over the meal. “You lead me in paths of righteousness. Jesus prefaced this meal by teaching them “many things.” After the food is passed out and all have had their fill, they collect the leftovers—twelve baskets-full. “My cup—or *basket*—runs over.” The point of all this is clear. It’s to show that “Jesus is my shepherd,” the true shepherd, the promised *good* shepherd, come to replace the pretender Herod.

And so, here we have two competing banquets: Herod's drunken party which ends with John's murder, and Jesus' impromptu picnic that provides the flock with what they need, even more than they need. One is a banquet of death, the other a banquet that gives life. One shows off the good shepherd, the other exposes the shameful imposter. The contrast couldn't be plainer. The whole thing is a masterpiece of political theater.

Still, Jesus makes clear, he is no threat to Herod, he has no plans to avenge his cousin. He could, if he wanted to, and he'd be within his rights to do so. But once the picnic ends, you'll note, he sends the people home, He disbands his "army."

Likely, there were spies for Herod in the crowd that day, and Jesus, no doubt, hoped his message would get back to Herod: Herod could rest secure at night, there'd be no reprisals. Yet, Jesus *had* showed Herod up, if he was smart enough to see it. What Jesus had done was deliver a challenge, not just to Herod's rule, but to all earthly rulers who failed to "shepherd" their people.

Indeed, the purpose of the music playing in the background of this scene isn't just to show that Jesus is a better, smarter ruler than Herod. This conflict with Herod was something of a sideshow to Jesus' real mission. That is to say, Jesus didn't feed the 5000 to get back at Herod. He did it because it was who he is. Jesus is the long-promised good shepherd, God come down to lead his people into the good life, eternal life.

And that is where we find our "take-away" this morning. You see, Jesus could have taken the bait, could have given in to the anxieties, worries, and prejudices of those around him. But instead Jesus stayed true to who he is and what he is about. As a result, he was able to be who the people needed him to be, the good shepherd, and live out that identity in a creative way.

We are not Jesus, but we have our own calling as God's children, as sheep of God's flock. That calling comes with privileges, but also with responsibilities, obligations to act a certain way, to follow a different path, a path marked by godly wisdom and graced living, by generosity and sacrifice, forbearance and forgiveness, truth-telling and peace-making.

At times we are tempted to forget that. But then we catch sounds of the divine melody, notes of the Gospel echoing in our life, and we remember, remember all that God has promised, all that God has done, and all that he has called us to be. Like the songs on TV shows, this Gospel song clues us to on what is really going on, what God is doing in the world. To be sure, some of us can be hard of hearing, but God's given us the Closed Captions right here in Scripture. Because God does not want anyone to miss what He's doing among us, the good life he has provided for us. Thanks be to God!