

Title: The shepherd of our horizon

Text: Psalm 23 and John 10:11-30

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Language is fascinating. What words we use to describe things.

Philosopher's using hermeneutical theory call our arena of known language, understood ideas, our images - the limits of our horizon.

It begins at home with the patience of our dear mothers and fathers, who train us with their language and ideas. And then it broadens as we move through life.

It is the sum total of all influences that make individuals who they are, including the social historical and political contexts in which they live. The horizon is the point from which one views the world and all its possibilities and undertakes any interpretations.

Those of us who have immigrated will know this well. Or its the experience when we travel. When we are describing an experience or some object we make us of or food we eat, and the person has absolutely no concept of it. Our horizons are different.

Perhaps we notice it also between the generations. Human creativity is expanding so quickly that one generation's conceptual arena (the limits of their horizon) is not the same as the generation following.

Jesus encounters this when he introduces the image Shepherd to his hearers (known in our text as "the Jews") meant the following:

- Unfaithful leaders of Israel were historically known as Bad Shepherds who consigned their flock to wolves (Jer 23:1-8; eek 34 and Zeph 3:3; also see 1 Enoch)
- Throughout the Torah and Tenach - the Hebrew Scriptures - God is repeatedly presented as the future shepherd of the people, a good shepherd who would gather the flock
- As the Israelite Kings went from bad to worse, the prophets began to imagine a future King who would be like David and 'shepherd the people' (se Micah 5:3)
- This is when the notion of one shepherd emerges who would form one flock (Ezek 34: 23-24).

Yet Jesus picks up their concept of Shepherd and expands it.

Never before had they heard or conceived of a Good Shepherd who would lay down his life; a self gift of the shepherd to the flock

Never before had they heard of a human having divine qualities (Jesus as Good Shepherd is One with the Father)

Never before had they heard of a Shepherd who would announce that there were other sheep to belong to this flock

The Gospel of John (Francis Maloney)

Jesus' horizon far surpasses the limits of their horizons and must have been incredibly unsettling - and we see this in their response.

Friends, this is one of many instances where language and images of God shift and expands.

For when we experience spiritual realities and closeness of the Divine, in some way.
We make use of the words and concepts that are nearest to our hearts.

These words and images are human ones that we loan to spiritual realm in order for us to somehow express something beyond us.

Now for me, the concept of Shepherd, while beautifully written in John's gospel has some resonance, I have not been exposed to many Shepherds in my life.
I am drawn to this human character who knows me intimately, whose voice I can recognize.
And I think of my grandmother, my closest and dearest friend Hina, my South African friend Brad who is like a brother to me.

For when they phone, they do not have to tell me who it is. And no matter how many months have gone by, when we talk, I know them and I am known.

That is the personal experience of God, who enfolds all of humanity into the flock.

Our language and images of God are an ever expanding arena.

When we overuse a name for God or an image of God - we set up for ourselves idols.
For God is not a Shepherd.
But like a Shepherd.

Perhaps the use of icons is a better way for us to understand our language of God.
For an icon is never meant to be a reproduction of the realities of this world. Rather the point of an icon is to give us a window into an alien frame of reference that is at the same time the structure that will make definitive sense of the world we inhabit. (Rowan Williams).

"It doesn't make God visible - rather it brings God's presence to our consciousness" (White, 1983, p. 105).

"The icon does not result from a vision but provokes one..." (Marion, 1991, pp. 17-18).

Whether we call God our Father, our Mother, our Shepherd, our best friend, King, Lamb, the everlasting arms.

All our words fall short before the mystery of One who is Beyond names.
Never fully know.
And yet calls us God's own.

The most timeless image of God, is in fact the living human. You and I.
We are image bearers. We are the imago Dei.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner is a long-time student and articulator of the mysteries and messages of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition. Kushner says mysticism tends to appear when religion — whatever the tradition — becomes too formal and logical.

I was leading a tour of the sanctuary, the prayer hall with the children in the congregation's preschool. And then I figured just as we ended, I would take them into the bima, or the little prayer stage up in front of the room, where there was an ark where we kept the scroll of the Torah. It was accessible via a big floor-to-ceiling curtain. And I got them up on the stage, and I

was about to call them — “Open the ark,” but I saw the teacher at the back tapping her wristwatch, which as you may know, is an old Talmudic gesture, which means your time is about up. So, I said, “I tell you what, boys and girls. We’ll come back when we get together again in a couple of weeks. We’ll come back here, and I’m going to open that curtain there and show you what’s behind it. It’s very special.” And so they all say, “Shalom, Rabbi,” and like little ducklings, follow the teacher back to the class.

Well, the next day, the teacher shows up at my office with the following story. Apparently the preceding day’s hastily-concluded lesson has occasioned a fierce debate among the little people as to what is behind the curtain. They didn’t know.

And, the following four answers are given, which is I think pretty interesting.

- One kid, obviously destined to become a professor of nihilistic philosophy at a great university, opined that behind that curtain was absolutely nothing.
- Another kid, less imaginative, thought it had a Jewish holy thing in there.
- A third kid, obviously a devotee of American game show television subculture, guessed that behind that curtain was a brand new car.
- And the fourth kid said “No, you’re all wrong. Next week when that rabbi man comes and opens that curtain, behind it, there would be a giant mirror.”

If we are indeed the image of God to our world:
Then how will we Shepherd?

- walk near living creatures (humans and otherwise) who need encouragement

In light of the latest UN report on extinction and global warming.

- how will we ensure that not a single creature goes astray?
- How will we make sure there is enough pasture for all to graze?

What will it mean for us to lay down our wealthy, comfortable lives for the sake of others who do not have? And for the sake of the next generation...

Bobby McFerrin the much loved vocal innovators and improvisers, a world-renowned classical conductor, and a passionate spokesman for music education, got to know God as Shepherd in the love of his mother.

He reworked Psalm 23 to bare witness to her love.

The choir is going to sing it for us now. The words are printed in your bulletin for you to read silently.