Sermon at Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville
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Scripture: John 10:22–30

Anyone who ever took a Sunday school class with Kevin Burns will understand that the Bible is more like a library than a single book. The Bible includes many different kinds of literature—biography, poetry, philosophy, stories, speeches, letters, history, mystery, genealogy, even adventure and romance. And these different works of literature were written in many different times and places throughout the history of the people of God, over more than a thousand years.

A lectionary is a list or schedule of readings from this vast library of scripture. Churches use lectionaries to determine what Bible passages to read on any given Sunday in the Christian year. We generally use the Revised Common Lectionary, a three-year cycle of readings shared by churches of many different traditions around the world. The Revised Common Lectionary began as an attempt to coordinate Protestant lectionaries with the new Catholic lectionary after Vatican II. Thanks to the Revised Common Lectionary, Catholics and many Protestant churches are generally "on the same page" when it comes to New Testament readings, although our Old Testament readings differ.

This Sunday is the fourth Sunday of the season of Easter, a span of seven weeks extending from the Resurrection of the Lord all the way to the Day of Pentecost. This Sunday is often called "Good Shepherd Sunday" because the lectionary always gives us a passage from the tenth chapel of the Gospel of John, where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep—those despised and rejected by others. Alongside the Gospel reading the Revised Common Lectionary offers two other readings, plus a psalm. We typically choose two of those passages to read in Sunday morning worship.

In today's reading from John, Jesus finds himself in a sticky situation. People are demanding to know whether he is indeed the promised Messiah. Now the setting for this story is critical: John says Jesus is standing in the temple during the winter festival of the dedication, better known to us as Hanukkah. So when people ask if he is the Messiah, this isn't just a casual theological question. They want to know if he will be the one to deliver them from the oppression of the Roman Empire—much as Judas Maccabaeus led a revolt against the Seleucid Empire, and cleansed the temple of Greek gods.

Standing there in the temple, surely they remembered the events of last Passover: when Jesus threw the merchants out of the temple declaring: Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Well, what are you going to do, Jesus? How long will you keep us in suspense? Jesus says: Listen to the words I have spoken and look at the works I have done. I have told you, but you do not believe; I have shown you, but you do not belong. Drawing on the image of the Good Shepherd, Jesus says: My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I will give them eternal life—a gift no one can ever take away.

This is one of the most beloved themes of scripture: the image of Jesus as a good shepherd, lovingly feeding and tending and protecting the flock—or people—entrusted to

his care. It's a theme that resonates with us on Mother's Day, as we remember mothers and other parental figures who have fed and tended and protected us. It's a theme that may also resonate with us after the election of Pope Leo XIV this week. The word "pastor" is Latin for shepherd; the Pope is often described as a shepherd or pastor for the whole Catholic Church. Pope Francis once said that a good pastor should have "the smell of the sheep."

It's easy to understand how this Gospel reading, with its pastoral image of shepherd and sheep, came to be such a beloved biblical passage. Unfortunately, in the very next verse, the story takes a dramatic and dangerous turn. John tells us that the crowds are angered by Jesus' close identification with God the Father, and they take up rocks to stone him. This is one of a number of passages of scripture used to justify centuries of violence and discrimination against Jewish people.

You see, the Gospel of John was written in the context of tension and struggle within the community of faith surrounding Jesus. And John frequently uses the Greek phrase *'oi Ioudaioi*—"the Jews" or "the Judeans"—to identify the people and crowds and leaders who were engaged in this debate. All too often, throughout our history, people have misused these Bible verses, falsely assigning blame for the death of Jesus to their Jewish neighbors. Of course, such claims ignore the fact that Jesus himself was a Jew, as were the first disciples. Such claims also neglect to mention that it was the Roman governor of Judea who presided over the trial of Jesus and sentenced him to death, as in "suffered under Pontius Pilate."

Lectionaries have contributed to this problem—especially during Holy Week and on Good Friday, when readings from the Gospel of John have provoked persecution. Another problem with our lectionary has been that it omitted readings from the Hebrew Scriptures during the seven weeks of this Easter season, limiting that great library of the Bible.

So just about a month ago, right here in Louisville, a group of church leaders from the United States and Canada decided to do something about that. The ecumenical body responsible for the Revised Common Lectionary, the Consultation on Common Texts, took action—providing new readings for Holy Week and Old Testament readings for the whole Easter season. Alongside these resources, the Consultation on Common Texts also released a statement renouncing anti-Jewish interpretations and offering alternate ways to translate *'oi Ioudaioi*.

These were the first changes to the lectionary in more than thirty years, since its release in 1992, and part of that work happened here at Highland! We were supposed to meet downtown at the Presbyterian Center, but we had to relocate due to the flooding and a power outage. Nolan, Kathleen, and Wayne quickly set us up with tables and teleconferencing equipment and we were able to continue our work. I'm so grateful for this congregation's hospitality, and for your witness to God's great faithfulness.

As followers of the Good Shepherd, we are called to seek justice, reconciliation, and peace among all the peoples of the earth—Christians, Muslims, and Jews, people of other faiths, or no faith. As followers of the Good Shepherd, we are called to lay down our lives for the sheep—never lashing out in acts of violence, always reaching out in times of trouble. As followers of the Good Shepherd, we remember Jesus' prayer "that all may be one."

We pray that Catholics and Protestants might find new ways to work together to feed, protect, and care for the most vulnerable: including immigrants and refugees, people who are poor or unhoused, those who are oppressed or excluded because of their race or gender or sexuality, and children, youth, and seniors.

Turning to Revelation, the final book in that great library of scripture, we watch and work and pray for the day when people will hunger thirst no more; when the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, guiding them to the springs of the water of life, and God—like a loving mother—will wipe away every tear from their eyes.