

John 10:1-21 "I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Gate."¹

Prepare the Lesson: Prepare the equipment needed to show the presentation of “The Good Shepherd in Early Christian Art” for the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship Question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and to lead into the study):

- A. Shepherds take care of sheep. What animal(s) have you ever been responsible for taking care of? (Yes, this includes pets.)
- B. Think of something you love to do. What symbol is/could be used for that activity? (For example, reading glasses or a book for someone who loves to read; a hiking stick or a boot for a hiker, etc.)

Information

Shepherding was not a holy profession, even for those who shepherded sheep that were grown to become sacrificial lambs at the Temple. Shepherds were at the bottom of the economic scale and were not particularly trusted by the “city folk.” Still, there was a rich tradition with shepherding. When Moses fled Pharaoh’s court, he became a shepherd before God called him to liberate his people from slavery. David, Israel’s greatest king, had been a boy shepherd.

Possibly the best known of all scriptures is often called, “The Shepherd Psalm.” In it, an “ordinary” profession is a metaphor for the holy God.

- Have a class member read Psalm 23.

Why do you think this psalm is so popular at funerals? (it speaks about the valley of the shadow of death; it promises comfort, etc.)

“He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.” This is God’s dream for the world, peace – shalom.

But who can lead us to that shalom? A shepherd can, according to Micah.

- Have a class member read Micah 2:12; 5:2-5a.

“In the Old Testament the good shepherd image is used in three ways. The first is where God is described as the shepherd of Israel [e.g., Psalm 23]...Second, the leaders of Israel are also

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referred to as shepherds [e.g., David, Moses, etc.] ... Third, the Old Testament also includes a promise of a new leader who will come from Bethlehem.”²

When Micah refers to “one from ancient days,” he is referring to this second category. Moses was a shepherd and later shepherded his people through the wilderness. David was a shepherd who later led his people as a great shepherd-king. David was considered the king of kings.

But even Moses and David had their problems. Do you remember why Moses had to flee Pharaoh’s palace to become a wilderness shepherd? (Moses murdered an Egyptian for beating a Jew.) Moses was a man of violence.

And, although David began as a handsome, psalm-writing, faith-centered golden child, what were David’s moral issues? (David had wandering eyes that led him to commit adultery and murder.) David was a man of violence.

What Israel needed, and what Micah predicted was on the way, was a *new* shepherd for God’s people.

Whereas Moses and David were murderers - men of violence - how does Micah describe this shepherd? (He will be “a man of peace.”) This shepherd will usher in shalom.

“[Micah] looks for a David-like king to defeat the forces that would destroy the land and one who would bring unity and peace to a newly reconstituted community, one who would feed the people and secure their rights in a land finally ruled by [God]... What Micah wanted for Israel and the nations is precisely what the early Christians believed that the coming of their Christ meant for their world: justice, unity, peace.”³

Imagine how this image of the Good Shepherd influenced Jesus. He heard it from his parents, in Scriptural readings at the synagogue and the Temple. As Jesus grew in his understanding of who he was as the Son of God, this holy image shaped his identity.

Jesus enveloped himself with this image and used the image many times in his teachings.

- Have a class member read John 10:1-21.

This image is one that meant a lot to the early church.

- Have class members read I Peter 5:4; Hebrews 13:20-21; Revelation 7:17.

² Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament*, (Downers Grove, IL:IVP Academic, 2004), 31f.

³ John C. Holbert, “What Did Micah Really Want?”
<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/What-Micah-Want-John-Holbert-12-17-2012?offset=1&max=1>

We see this image in the earliest art we have of the early church, found in catacombs in Rome.

[Read or summarize this quote:]

“What was the popular Religion of the first Christians? It was, in one word, the Religion of the Good Shepherd. The kindness, the courage, the grace, the love, the beauty of the Good Shepherd was to them, if we may say so, Prayer Book and Articles, Creeds and Canons, all in one. They looked on that figure, and it conveyed to them all that they wanted. As the ages passed on, the Good Shepherd faded from the mind of the Christian world, and other emblems of the Christian faith have taken his place. Instead of the gracious and gentle Pastor there came the Omnipotent Judge, or the Crucified Sufferer, or the Infant in His Mother’s arms, or the Master in His Parting Supper, or the figures of innumerable saints and angels, or the elaborate expositions of the various forms of theological controversy.”⁴

Why do you think the Church has focused on these other images and forgotten the shepherd image? (We are less aware of shepherds; we need a variety of images; this is not the image that we relate to anymore, etc.)

Ancient Christian art is found primarily in Roman catacombs. There are three key images:

“Their most characteristic symbols and pictures are the Good Shepherd, the Fish, and the Vine. These symbols almost wholly disappeared after the fourth century... The Shepherd... suggested the recovery of the lost sheep, the tender care and protection, the green pasture and the fresh fountain, the sacrifice of life: in a word, the whole picture of a Saviour.”⁵

As a matter of fact, there are no images of the cross in ancient Christian art. There are images of Jesus that serve as evidence of his incarnation, such as frescoes of Jesus feeding the 5000 and serving the disciples at the Last Supper.

“It was not in late antiquity but only at the beginning of the Middle Ages that image-makers began to use the subject of the Crucifixion as a representation of the death of Jesus. In late antiquity, the scene of Golgotha, sometimes realistic in detail, did not extend its realism to the figure of the Crucified, and especially not in order to represent him after his death... [D]uring this period images of the Crucifixion were used not to designate the reality of Jesus’ death but to demonstrate the glory of Christ, his victory over death (that is, a symbol of the Resurrection), the universality of salvation through the Cross, and so on.”⁶

How did the Church come to choose the cross to be its primary holy symbol?

⁴ Robert C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*, 7th edition (London: John W. Parker, 1857), Quoted in Bailey, 21f.

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*. Quoted in Bailey, 21.

⁶ André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton, 1968), 131f.

The Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312, according to the ancient church historian Eusebius, after a vision of a cross appeared.

“About the time of the midday sun, when the day was just turning, [Constantine] said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, ‘By this sign conquer.’ Amazement at this spectacle seized him and the whole company of soldiers that was then accompanying him... Thereupon, as he slept, the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which had appeared in the sky, and urged him to make a copy of the sign which had appeared in the sky, and to use this as protection against the attacks of the enemy. Goldsmiths and jewelers... produced a tall pole plated with gold that had a transverse bar forming the shape of a cross. Up at the extreme top a wreath woven of precious stones and gold had been fastened. On it two letters, intimating by its first characters the name ‘Christ’ formed the monogram of the Saviour’s title, though being intersected in the middle by chi. These letters the emperor also used to wear on his helmet.”⁷

Thus, the symbols of the cross and the Chi Rho were adopted by Constantine and his army.

When the Church and the State chose the cross to be its primary symbol, it took up a symbol of ultimate violence. The Roman violence was against enemies of the state and heretics. It was not so difficult for later Christians to use this violent symbol to attack enemies of the state and heretics in the Crusades. They could hardly have used the protective and providing shepherd image to stir up hatred for non-Christians.

Is it time we go back to Bethlehem, to renew our appreciation for the shepherd-savior?

Transformational Exercise

In the next few moments of silence, reflect on these pictures. These are the earliest depictions of Jesus that we have. They come from the catacombs of Rome, Italy.

[Show the slide presentation. Take your time going from one slide to another, both so the captions may be read and so there is time for a moment of reflection. The presentation may be found here:

<https://greatbibleteachers.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/The-Good-Shepherd-in-Early-Christian-art-2.pptx>]

A shepherd leads, protects, and provides for sheep. In a time of silent prayer, think about this holy image of Jesus as a shepherd. What is it that you need the Holy Shepherd to do for you today?

Do you need guidance?

⁷ Quoted in Paul Stevenson, *Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor* (New York: Overlook, 2009), 183f.

Do you need salvation?

Do you need reminding that the Shepherd cares for you?

Ask the Lord to be that for you in this time of silent prayer, and then I will close our session with a verbal prayer.

[After the silence, close in a prayer something like this:] *Good Shepherd, we are your sheep. You have heard of prayers even though they have been prayed silently. Guide us. Protect us. Save us. Give us peace. Amen.*