

Can You Tell the Difference?

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11-26-17 Christ the King Sunday

Based upon Ezek. 34:1-7, 10-16; Matt. 27:15-23

A week ago, an article in the Science section of *The Washington Post* reported the result of a new study on sheep.¹ It has now been demonstrated that sheep have the ability, not just to recognize the faces of fellow sheep, but also of human beings. When the sheep in the study were asked to identify which of two pictures was one of former president Obama, after they had been preconditioned to associate Obama's picture with getting treats, 8 times out of 10 they were able to pick his picture with ease. [*Slide of photograph of experiment in article shown.*²] This was true even when Obama's image was matched with that of another African American male. The point of the study was not to prove that all sheep are Democrats, however; the study also used images of celebrities Emma Watson and Jake Gyllenhaal. The point of the study was to demonstrate that notwithstanding sheep's reputation for being, how shall I put it, not at the top of the intellectual hierarchy of the barnyard, they were nevertheless able to discern the many, very subtle differences in people's faces. Shepherds have known for millennia that sheep can identify the voices of their specific shepherds. But this study showed that they can judge correctly by appearances too. The hope is that by studying how the sheep do this, scientists may someday be able to understand and treat better the facial recognition impairment which is common in people with Huntington's disease.

That is a noble effort, which makes the thought of scientists spending a whole lot of time and money trying to get sheep to recognize Obama's face seem less ridiculous. But the experiment would be so much better, I think, if the sheep could be taught to discern not just between faces, but also between hearts. If the sheep could learn how to discern good shepherds from bad ones, then surely they would be better off. The only problem is that in order for them to learn that, we would have to teach them, and that is a skill we have yet to master ourselves. As today's Scripture lessons illustrate, when human beings are the "sheep" in need of a good leader, we often cannot tell the difference between the good ones and the bad ones until after it is too late.

Now admittedly, the bad shepherds that we heard about in the *Ezekiel* passage were not chosen by the sheep, the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. In those days Judah was not a democracy. The original kings, Saul and David, were chosen by God through prophets. After that, succession stayed within families until there were no more male heirs, or until someone else came in and took the crown by force. But once someone became king, there still was the implicit assumption that that man worked for God because that was the original plan when the people moved into the Promised Land. God was the real king. The people who bore that title were merely supposed to be God's servants on earth; they were the shepherds chosen to watch God's sheep.

But by Ezekiel's day, which was the late 6th Century B.C.E., right before the Kingdom of Judah fell into the hands of the Babylonians, the kings were not serving God in the least. So

¹ Guarino, Ben, "Hail to the sheep for recognizing the faces of celebs" in THE WASHINGTON POST, Nov. 14, 2017, E2.

² *Ibid.*

instead of shepherding God's sheep, they were abusing and neglecting them. Specifically God charged them with the following violations of their responsibilities: 1) failing to feed the sheep, and using them to clothe themselves instead; 2) failing to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, and retrieve the lost; 3) being harsh with the sheep, and 4) allowing the sheep to become prey. In other words, instead of taking care of their subjects, the kings in Ezekiel's day were greedy and self-interested politicians who used their status and their power to profit themselves at the expense of the most vulnerable in their society. Instead of guarding their flocks and leading them to green pastures, they continuously put them in dangerous and deadly positions.

For years God had said through the prophets to the various kings of Israel and Judah, "Don't make me come down there!" when they abandoned the ways of God's covenant in favor of the world's ways. But by Ezekiel's day, God was so frustrated and angry that instead of threatening them in that way, God pledged to do just that, to come down and deal with the problem Godself. "You're fired," God said to the bad shepherds. "If I can't trust you to do right by my sheep, then I'm going to come down and do the work myself. I will be their shepherd. I will gather them up and dress their wounds, and feed them and protect them. I am against you, bad shepherds, but I am still for the sheep. So watch out, here I come."

When Ezekiel first prophesied about God coming down to be a good shepherd for the people, he was envisioning God providing immediate relief to the people in the form of a new, better leader. The people were barely hanging on and about to be taken away into exile. So Ezekiel was not saying, "Don't worry. In 450 years or so I will send a shepherd leader who will be the messiah." That would not have inspired much hope in the people, or fear in the bad shepherd kings. But when Jesus did come 450 years later, and began to minister to the sick, the weak, the hungry, and the lost, and when he told people, (according to the *Gospel of John*), "I am the good shepherd," then Ezekiel's words took on a whole new life for Christians, becoming a messianic prophecy that had been fulfilled. Jesus was God-come-to-earth to shepherd the sheep as it was meant to be done.

His coming should have been a moment of rejoicing and relief for the sheep of his day, but we all know that it wasn't, at least not for everyone. Despite the fact that Jesus did everything right, when it came time for the sheep to pick between him and another very similar-seeming shepherd, called Jesus Barabbas in *Matthew*, they still picked the wrong one! They had before them two people who were superficially very similar. They were both Jews. They were both revolutionaries. They were called similar things: Jesus, Son of God (the Father), versus Jesus, Son of the Father (which is what Barabbas means). But a discerning sheep should have recognized the difference between them, similarities notwithstanding, because in their hearts the men were profoundly different people. Yes they were both Roman prisoners, but Jesus was innocent and Barabbas was a murderer. Yes they were both Jews, but Jesus was interested in helping all people not just the Jews as Barabbas was. Yes they were both revolutionaries, but Jesus wanted to change the world with love, grace, and mercy, and Barabbas wanted to change the world with violence. The two Jesuses were as different as night and day. But the people chose night. They chose Barabbas, and the true Shepherd was sentenced to death as a result.

Now some scholars say today that there was no Barabbas. There is little or no historical evidence that Pilate had any kind of a practice of releasing a prisoner at the people's demand, let

alone evidence that he released a specific prisoner called either Barabbas or Jesus Barabbas instead of Christ. But even if Mark invented Barabbas to make a point, and Matthew expanded his story, we still would be wise to recognize that the choice the people made was real whether the criminal was or not. As we've studied in my New Testament class, Mark was writing to an audience of devastated Jews who had just lost a huge revolt against Rome and watched their beloved Temple destroyed. Their people had chosen to try to transform their situation through violence and having power over others. They had chosen the way of Barabbas whether he was real or not, and they had failed miserably and endangered themselves as a result.

Matthew knew that the choice was real too, which is why he reworked the story to make the external similarities between Jesus and Barabbas even stronger. He wanted to teach his audience about the dangers of judging a shepherd by externals. If you want to follow a good leader, you must look at the leader's heart. You must stop assuming that the one with the biggest stick is the most powerful, and instead look for one willing to give up his life for the sheep. You must recognize that there is no such thing as redemptive violence, and choose instead to follow Christ's way of redemptive love.

Unfortunately, we still haven't gotten the point. Human beings choose Barabbas over Jesus all the time. Sometimes it is because we are fooled by appearances. We assume from how people present themselves that they are certain kinds of people, and then discover that they are not later. But more often than not, we choose Barabbas because in our heart of hearts, what we really think we need is a shepherd like Barabbas, not Jesus. We are drawn to people who seem to embody power and show a desire to use that power to dominate others. We are drawn to people who seem to embody physical or political strength or authority, more than emotional and spiritual strength and authority. Right now in our culture, many people see kindness as weakness, compromise as selling out, and a willingness to step out of the limelight in order to shine it on others a sign of impotence, foolishness, or both. But when we follow these kinds of leaders, the whole flock suffers. We also demonstrate to God that we do not really believe in the power of love and help to transform, nearly as much as we believe in the power to dominate and control. We are telling God that we still would rather take a shot with Barabbas' way than follow Christ's.

Our poor discernment reminds me of an old Aesop's fable. I wish it was about sheep so my animal metaphors would be consistent, but it's about frogs. The story goes that there once was a time when the frogs became discontented because they had no one to rule over them. So they asked [their god] to give them a king. [Their god], recognizing the folly of their request, cast a log into the pool where they lived and said that it should be their king. The frogs were terrified at first by the power of the splash, and hid themselves submissively in the deepest parts of the pool. But after a while when the log remained motionless, they grew bolder, and eventually had such contempt for their king that they took to sitting upon it in the sunshine. They begged [their god] to take away the sluggish king and give them a better, more dynamic one. The [frog god], annoyed by the persistent foolishness of the frogs, sent a stork to rule over them, who no sooner arrived among them, than he began to catch and eat the frogs as fast as he could."³

³ Adapted from a version in Once Upon A Time: The Fairy Tale World of Arthur Rackham, Margery Darrell, ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), 244.

The shepherds in Ezekiel's day were eating their subjects just like the stork, and many of the leaders of our day are doing the same. It is not a priority of the majority of our leaders right now to feed the hungry, heal the sick, care for the weak, or find the lost. If the measure of the greatness of a nation is in how it treats its weakest members, then the lack of compassion being demonstrated by many of our nation's leaders right now should shock us and motivate us to speak out, which our denomination does regularly. But ultimately the lesson conveyed by both of today's texts is about more than just political leaders. It's about choosing between the ways of God and the ways of the world. J. Oswald Sanders once said that leadership is ultimately about influence.⁴ Who do you allow to influence you in your daily life? Who do you follow, if not in a Twitter sense (since I know this isn't a real Twitter-kind of flock), then in a physical, emotional, or spiritual sense? Are you drawn to people who use their power to dominate others or empower them? Are you drawn to people who demonstrate strength through control or strength through compassion? Think about Ezekiel's list again as you ponder these questions this week. God's shepherds feed the sheep; they do not feed off them for their own gain. God's shepherds care for the sick and the weak; they do not harm the flock, or put individual sheep in harm's way. The people who influence you the most should be the people who follow Christ's way because that is the way we are all called to follow.

Today, on Christ the King Sunday, we celebrate that God came down to earth to be the shepherd king we need, and to show us the ways of righteousness and peace. But implicit in the celebration is a choice. Are we ready to follow him, or do we still favor Barabbas? We need to know this clearly because this Sunday is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Next week we begin Advent, the season in which we will pray each week for the Lord to come and be with us. We will do this knowing that God already answered our prayers. But we still pray to prepare our hearts to welcome Christ in. I think one of the reasons Christ the King Sunday was scheduled for right before Advent was to make sure that we will all be praying for the right kind of messiah, the one who was revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Our choice matters not just because we want to be sure we are following the right shepherd ourselves, but also because, as I told the children, we are always in a position to influence others ourselves even if we are not leaders. Sheep follow other sheep, not just shepherds. This means we always have the power to lead people in God's way of love, or to lead them astray by going the wrong way ourselves.

We live in a world which is filled with Barabbases. But the good news of the Gospel is that God came to earth so that we would have a better option. Make sure you can tell the difference between Barabbas' way and Christ's way, and then join me in leading others in the way of love. Amen.

⁴ Swindoll, Charles R., Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 336 (citing J. Oswald Sander's Spiritual Leadership).