

I have always loved the stained-glass windows in the churches I have served. In fact, I have pictures of them hanging in my office. I spent many hours staring into these windows contemplating the greatness of God. I still spend time in my office looking at these windows and stop from time to time at each of our churches to simply sit and meditate upon them. The window that always drew my attention the most was Christ the Good Shepherd.

In each of these depictions Christ is standing in the middle of a field, with a staff, holding one sheep and having at least another sheep at his feet. Also, his gaze is direct as if looking straight at all of us, that we are his sheep. This has always been a powerful image for me to reflect upon remembering that Christ is still leading us forward to do God’s work.

These symbols of our faith keep us going, especially in uncertain seasons such as this. I don’t know about you, but my prayer during this season has been: “Lead me forward God.” In a time where we all may feel stuck, the Good Shepherd beckons us forward.

We are living in a season of corporate anxiety. As Professor Curtis Chang, who hails from Duke Divinity School said this week: “This may be one of the only times that the whole world is experiencing corporate anxiety at the same time for the same reason.”ⁱ I believe that we all may be experiencing anxiety fatigue.

We are tired because we want things to go back to normal. We are tired of all the limitations. And we are tired because we are doing all we can to be as safe as possible and to follow all the different protocols. We are tired and anxious because our Thanksgivings and Christmases will look a lot different than in years past. We are sad because we have had to cancel many of the events that we love. We are anxious and tired, but our Good Shepherd is there with us leading us forward with hope.

We are tired, but that is why we all called to heed Jesus’ words in Matthew 11: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” Today is Christ the King Sunday in the life of the church which gives us an opportunity to remember that Christ, and not our anxiety, continues to reign over our lives.

We can continue to recognize Christ as King as we surrender ourselves and our fears to God. So today, may we celebrate our King and continue to prepare for Christ’s coming as we start Advent next week.

Today we also find ourselves in the final week of our “Gratitude” sermon series where we celebrate that Christ is our Good Shepherd. We recognize Christ as our Savior when we can give thanks to God repeatedly for saving us and reigning over our lives.

As I was preparing for this sermon, it got me thinking about how many times circles are mentioned in the Bible and the spiritual significance of them. The first circle that came to my mind is from Joshua 6. Where God called the Israelites to march around Jericho in circles for six days until they would be able to claim the city not through battle or force, but simply by heeding God’s command to walk in circles.

The second circle that came to mind was in Judges 7, where Gideon and his men tricked his opponents into thinking that he had a huge army by getting his men to stand in a circle and light torches at night so it seemed like there were a lot more of them. Their enemies were so scared that they fled.

In both these instances, the people of God were able to move forward because they stood together in a circle all at the direction of God.

The final image and probably the most powerful is of Christ and the disciples who were gathered in the upper room. Unlike Michelangelo’s famous picture of “The Last Supper” depicting Christ at a table with those at his right and his left, scholars believe the disciples “were reclining, Roman-style, and eating from small round tables.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This shows us that we as the body of Christ grow and serve in community with no hierarchy. We are all beloved by God.

The very symbol that represents God is a circle. We see this imagery in Revelation 22 when God says: “I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” God reigns in a circle that never ends, so we too are called to participate in a never-ending circle of gratitude.

The past seven weeks we have explored many ways to express our gratitude to God. You have been challenged to do individual practices as well as corporate acts of gratitude through worship. The point of this whole series focused on gratitude is to be reminded that we are always called to be thankful to God because God never changes. So even when our situations in life change, God continues to be our constant, and for that we give God thanks and praise.

We can continue to be grateful when we recognize that we are God’s sheep and God will always be our Good Shepherd. Yet sometimes we try to shepherd ourselves, charting our own course away from God and God’s plan for our lives. We see that we are not alone. Many people in the Bible thought they could go it alone.

I think my favorite example is Jonah. God called him to go to the Ninevites and call them to repentance. But Jonah had other plans. He went another way and ended up in the ocean swallowed by a huge fish. My favorite part of the scripture reads: “Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time..” (Jonah 3). God gave Jonah another chance and God continues to pursue us. Thanks be to God!

Sometimes, we too are like Jonah. We can be stubborn sheep and we think we can find our own way: a better way or faster way. And, yet time and time again we long for the Good Shepherd to find us and lead us home.

It is interesting that there is imagery all throughout the Bible of God as our shepherd. As we heard the Scripture from Ezekiel 34 this morning, we read about God our Shepherd and rescuer. The one who will find the injured and the lost. The one who will bring us to water and restore us. The one who will ultimately save us.

We wear Psalm 23 on our hearts remembering that God our Shepherd leads us beside still waters, restores our souls, and is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death.

I wonder how you are experiencing God as the Good Shepherd in your life today. Maybe you are feeling like a lost sheep, or maybe you can’t find the water to quench your spiritual soul. Maybe you find yourself at the top of a mountain or in a dark valley. Through our Scripture today we are reminded that God continues God’s presence with us through the gift of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Matthew 18 we are comforted when Jesus tells us that God cares about each one of us enough to come looking for us even when we may not be looking for God. This is the God we serve. God cares about the lost, those who can’t find their way back, and God will make a way to find us over and over again.

Even in the book of Genesis when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, God came looking for them asking: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9)

I have always appreciated the personal God that we serve. The one who knows each of us by name just as a shepherd would know their sheep.

I have always thought that it was amazing that Jesus returned after his death and before his resurrection to bestow peace upon his disciples and offer them strength for the journey ahead. Here Jesus gave the disciples, many who had not had the strength to be there for him in his time of need, forgiveness and support.

Christ our Good Shepherd continues to offer us peace. My hope for us as we approach the Thanksgiving Holiday is that we build foundations of gratitude that last beyond this time.

How will you build a circle of gratitude into your own life? How will you embody your faith in such a way where you give thanks to God each and every day?

The good news for our lives today is that Christ the Good Shepherd is continuing to lead us forward. The question before us today is will we follow?

We must ask ourselves what are the things holding us back in our lives that are keeping us from moving forward?

Is it fear or anxiety? Is it obligation or busyness? We all have something that we are dealing with. As a church and the body of Christ we are called to move forward in gratitude.

This week I was blessed with deep gratitude as our family put up our Christmas tree. I know it is early, but don't we need a little more joy in 2020? As we put up each circular ornament so many beautiful memories kept flooding my mind of Christmases past and the many saints who partook in that time.

These moments of gratitude sustained me and grounded me. My prayer for our charge is that we continue to find things to be grateful for even in the midst of uncertainty.

As we turn our hearts to Advent next Sunday, we wait with expectant and grateful hearts. May we follow the lead of our Good Shepherd so that we can continue in a circle of gratitude. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Curtis Chang. “Anxiety: Opportunity for Spiritual Growth.” On-line study.

ⁱⁱ <https://apnews.com/article/594379cba0e281e5678dafd808cb2a90>

Additional Resources: New Interpreter's Bible Commentary. Vol V & VII. Abingdon Press: 2015.