

SERMON NOTES

Sixth Sunday After Easter

Synaxis Gospel
John 9:39-10:10

THE ABUNDANT LIFE

INTRODUCTION

Today is the Sunday before we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord into heaven. During the forty days between Easter Sunday and the celebration of His Ascension, our Synaxis readings have focused on important teachings of our Lord that had not been understood by the disciples before the Crucifixion. For the last in this series, the Armenian Church has chosen a particularly meaningful passage in which Jesus portrays Himself as our Shepherd.

The reading follows immediately after the record of the healing of a man born blind. The religious leaders had been offended that Jesus had performed this miracle on a Sabbath day. After the former blind man had been thoroughly questioned about the healing, the religious leaders had excommunicated him for defending Jesus as a prophet, and one through whom God was working.

We pick up the reading at the point where Jesus contrasts the reaction of the healed man, and those like him, with that of the religious leaders, and those like them. Mankind is effectively divided into two groups by their reaction to Christ.

SYNAXIS READING

John 9:39-10:10

And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind."

Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things, and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?"

Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see', your sin remains.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber.

But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out.

“When he puts forth all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, because they know his voice. And a stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them.

Jesus therefore said to them again, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them.

“I am the door; if any man enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

“The thief comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy; I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly.

NOTES

And Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind.”

This statement follows the confession of faith of the man who had been born blind, and whom Jesus had cured. The man had not only been physically blind, he had also been spiritually blind. He had not immediately recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah or Christ, but only as a prophet, or as a man to whom God had given power. But the man was willing, and when Jesus made Himself known to the man, he believed and worshipped Jesus.

A judgment occurs when people are confronted with Jesus. The judgment results in a division between people. The judicial division is between those who are willing to accept Him and those who are not willing. The man born blind physically was also cured of his spiritual blindness, when he admitted that he did not know, but was willing to accept the word of Jesus. There are others, however, who see (understand) somewhat, but in refusing to accept the word of Jesus, they lose what spiritual insight they possessed.

Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things, and said to Him, “We are not blind too, are we?”

The Pharisees—those who were the recognized teachers of the Mosaic Law, and were some of the religious leaders of the Jewish people—were in the vicinity, and overheard Jesus’ statement. They understood that He was using physical blindness as a metaphor for spiritual blindness.

The Greek form of their question: “We are not blind also are we?” (Μή καί ημεῖς τυφλοὶ ἐσμεν ;) indicates that they expected to hear a negative reply, “Certainly not!”¹ They must have been thoroughly offended with Jesus’ reply.

Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, ‘We see’, your sin remains.

The point of their question was for Jesus to admit that it is obvious that *they* are not blind. They were in effect claiming spiritual sight.

But Jesus replied, that *if* they were blind (which they were), they would have an excuse, blindness. As blind men, they could be cured of their sin; but in rejecting that excuse and claiming that they see, they were stuck with no excuse. They were stuck with their sin. This is true because their knowledge of the Scriptures should have given them ‘sight’ and prepared them to accept the very one they were sinfully rejecting. They were sinning against the very knowledge they claimed to possess.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber.² But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out.

The occasion was either the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths) which is held in the fall after the Harvest, or it is the Feast of Dedication (Hanukah) which falls in the winter. If we follow the order of the verses as they are written, it is Tabernacles, and the discussion is a continuation of Jesus’ remarks after curing the man born blind.

The Pharisees, prominent religious leaders of the Jews, had just been told by Jesus that their claim to ‘see,’ understand spiritual truth, had placed them in the sinful situation of rejecting the light

¹ Μή is used with the indicative in questions when a negative reply is expected. See F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, translated by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) p. 220. J. H. Bernard in his *Gospel According to St. John, Vol. II* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928) p. 340-41, has the correct statement of the grammatical rule, but a wrong interpretation of it—“The Pharisees had expected that He would say, ‘Yes, you are blind, despite your authoritative position as religious guides.’ ” Actually, the Pharisees had expected Him to affirm that they were *not* blind.

² The Greek New Testament was not originally written in chapters. The chapter breaks are artificial. To some scholars, therefore, this statement about the sheepfold seems out of place, because it does not seem to properly follow that of the response to the ‘blind’ Pharisees. They suggest that a block of verses has been shifted, and verses 10:19-29 should introduce this verse. If this is what has happened in the transmission of the text, restoring the verses would shift the discussion of the sheepfold forward by three months, from the Feast of Tabernacles to the Feast of Dedication. It would also provide an introductory question: “Are you the Messiah?” The sheep-fold discussion is seen to address this question.

However the scholars settle this issue, one thing can be said: whether or not Jesus was the Messiah was certainly the topic of discussion among the people who listened to Jesus’ teaching at the Temple in Jerusalem. This interest of the people was a concern of the religious rulers who, for the most part, had decided that Jesus was *not* the Messiah. For this reason, they had refused to listen to the former blind man’s arguments in favor of Jesus. Moreover, they—these religious *shepherds*—had turned him out of the Jewish *fold*. Jesus had found him, and had made the former blind man one of His sheep—one of those who follow Him. It seems, then, that it really doesn’t matter if the verses are out of order or not.

they had from their knowledge of the Law. In effect, they were unfit rulers of the Jewish people. The figure of speech, or metaphor, that Jesus used described the situation.

In the economy of Jesus' day, everyone was familiar with the work of shepherds and the relationship that they had with their sheep. So, when Jesus began this description of the sheepfold, they would have understood, in this case, a courtyard with stone walls in front of a house.³ The door to the enclosure was guarded by a porter. This seems to have been a place where more than one shepherd brought their flocks to overnight. The legitimate shepherds were duly admitted, and called out their *own* flocks *by name* in the morning. Only those up to no good, a thief or robber (or bandit), would try to enter the sheepfold by another way than the door.

“When he puts forth all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

The proper shepherd gets his own sheep out of the fold, and then leads them out to pasture. They follow him because they know him—they know his voice. He has given them their own names.

And a stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

The sheep only trust their own shepherd, anyone else is a stranger and they will bolt and run if anyone but the shepherd tries to herd them. Only the shepherd's voice is trusted. When he calls they follow.

This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them.

The Pharisees certainly understood what Jesus was saying about sheep. This was common knowledge. What they did not understand was the point Jesus was making with His illustration.

They should have had some inkling. The term *shepherd* was often used as a metaphor for *ruler*. Especially, kings and princes were styled *shepherds*. The duty of rulers was to care for and protect the *sheep* (the people).⁴

Jesus therefore said to them again, “Truly, truly, I say to you, **I am the door of the sheep. All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them.**

Jesus then explains. He is the sheep's door. If *before* indicates place, He stands between the sheep and those who would steal them. If *before* indicates time,⁵ the other 'doors' were treacherous and led to disaster.

³ Or possibly this could have been a stonewalled enclosure in the fields.

⁴ This metaphor was first used by Moses, who was about to die, when he requested that the LORD set a replacement for himself over the people “who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep which have no shepherd [Numbers 27:17].” Moses himself was styled shepherd of His (God's) flock [Isaiah 63:11]. Later Micahiah prophesied the death of the king, Ahab, and the scattering of the people in this language: “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep which have no shepherd [1Kings 22:17].” King Cyrus was called *shepherd* by Isaiah quoting God [Isaiah 44:28]. King Solomon may be referring to himself when he says the wise words were from “one shepherd” [Ecclesiastes 12:11]. King Nebuchadnezzar was described in terms of a shepherd in Jeremiah 43:12. Significantly, God was called “my Shepherd” by David in Psalm 23. God is entitled “Shepherd” in Psalm 80:1; Jeremiah 31:10. There are passages that also speak of bad shepherds, those that have not cared for the flock and have exploited them instead. Some of these verses are Zechariah 11:16-17.

⁵ The Greek preposition, *προ*, can refer either to place or time.

Jesus used the theologically significant term 'ἐγώ εἰμι which means 'I Am' (the meaning of the Hebrew Name of God). Used here, the term could be a reference to His identity, or it could simply be emphasizing "I am the sheep's door"—there is no other. All the others have not been the sheep's 'door'. The sheep (those who belong to Him) have not obeyed anyone but Him.

“I am the door; if any man enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

Our translators have chosen to translate “if any man,” although the term so translated could still be referring to sheep. Nevertheless, Jesus is speaking about the flock or people of God. Anyone, like a sheep, can find safety under His protection and become a part of God's flock. Moreover, s/he, as a part of that flock, will find all that is needed for life. However, such a person must come to that wonderful life through Him.

“The thief comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy; I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly.

Now, all the Old Testament passages in which the metaphors, *sheep* and *shepherd*, were used must have been called to mind by Jesus' words. Through the actions of their rulers, the Jewish people had become like sheep without a shepherd. Those who were supposed to be their shepherds, their kings and princes, had been false shepherds. Ezekiel prophesied against them:

“Thus says the Lord God [unto the shepherds, ‘Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat, and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them.’⁶

In that Old Testament passage, the LORD had further told those false shepherds that He Himself would be the Shepherd of the Flock with these words:

“For thus says the LORD God, “Behold, I, Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for [or seeks out] his herd in the day that he is among his scattered sheep; so I will care for [or seek out] My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day.”⁷

Moreover, the Old Testament taught that the sheep under the LORD's care in the person of the Messiah would lead a life of abundance:

“I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be upon the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down in good grazing ground, and they will feed in

⁶ Ezekiel 34:2-4

⁷ Ezekiel 34:11-12 *Shepherd* was a particular metaphor for the divine Messiah in Isaiah 40:10-11: *Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him. Behold His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him. Like a shepherd He will tend His flock. In His arm He will gather the lambs, and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes.*

Verse 12 of the Isaiah passage goes on to describe this Shepherd as the Creator of heaven and earth.

Ezekiel 34:23-24 is another example (the Messiah is called David in this passage because he was to be from King David's descendents, as of course was the case with Jesus):

“Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

*rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed my flock and I will lead them to rest,” declares the Lord God.*⁸

All of these were important passages from the Old Testament that the Pharisees had dutifully studied. These passages should have sprung to their minds as Jesus spoke. When He applied the metaphor of the promised ‘Shepherd’ to Himself, it should have been very clear to them that He was claiming to be the divine Messiah. In doing this, He was announcing that He was God Himself. Furthermore, the Pharisees should have understood that, like the false shepherds of the Old Testament writings, they had not been authenticated at the ‘door.’ They were the thieves and the robbers who sought to prey on the sheep.

In contrast to “all that had come before Him” Jesus provides His own not simply with life, but with abundant life.

APPLICATION

During the spring, on April 24, we remember once again our Armenian martyrs, the victims of the genocide. In a few days we will celebrate the Ascension of our Lord to His throne in Heaven, to the place of all power in heaven and on earth. To many, these two events seem opposites, a weird kind of ‘oxymoron’—things that do not fit together. In addition, our reading teaches us that the All-Powerful One is the Shepherd of those who were so horribly slaughtered by His enemies. How do we make any sense out of it! Sadly, many cannot make any sense out of it and have laid aside their faith. Others, equally mystified, have clung to their faith and, like Job of old, have cried out, “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him.”⁹

In our lesson, our Lord knew He would be crucified in about six months. In the verses just following our reading, He said that He was the Good Shepherd Who laid down His life for the sheep. His life was given so that we might live. In our lesson, He said that this was the purpose of His coming. He came to give us life, abundant life. (“The genocide victims died,” you whisper).

To our human minds, God does not act the way we expect Him to act. He is all powerful; therefore He should prevent bad things from happening. There should be no floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, wildfires; there should be no birth defects, cancer, heart attacks, or any of the other diseases that plague mankind; He should prevent people from killing each other—there should be no wars; there should be no genocide. But He allows it all.

Jesus was about thirty-three years old when He died—in the prime of life. But the life that He gladly bought for us with His death, was it physical life? No, it was spiritual life, abundant spiritual life. For us on earth, abundant spiritual life is present when we walk through good days and when we walk through horror. It is for this time on earth, and it is for eternity. The disciples finally understood this, and most of them, like our Armenian relatives, were slaughtered by those who were blind to Truth. They were not surprised or mystified by the horrible physical deaths they endured; Jesus had told them

⁸ Ezekiel 34:14-15

⁹ Job 13:15

to expect it. Those who cannot see His truth will always hate those who belong to Christ. Those who belong to Christ experience the end of their temporary physical lives, but their abundant spiritual lives live on forever, because they are with the Shepherd.

In the beginning of the earth, we are told in the book of Genesis, man lived in a perfect environment. There was no death; there was no lack of any good thing; there was an abundance of good things. Was this the abundant life? Was the perfect physical environment the essence of the abundant life? No, their abundant life was not in the good things they enjoyed in their perfect garden. They had abundant life not because they lived in the Garden of Eden, but because they lived in the Presence of God. He was with them. To be with Him is abundant life. Whatever else surrounds us physically—perfection, or mundane, or even horror—does not change this.

But our sins tore us away from our God, in Whose Presence is life. Our sins cost us not only the perfect environment, it cost us our connection with life. We were like sheep that had gone astray—we had left our Shepherd. We were plunged in the deep and fearful darkness of Godless death.

Thanks be to God, He did not leave us in this hopeless situation. Becoming a man Himself, He paid the penalty for our sins so that we could be restored to Him. He has ascended, and today sits on His throne in Heaven. Someday, He will return to earth and reign as King over a restored and perfect earth, for He is the Christ; the Messiah He was announcing Himself to be in our reading.

But until that day, now, like the Good Shepherd that He is, He searches for, and calls to, His lost sheep. Those of us who respond to His call, and return to Him, find in Him all that we need. He is abundant life. No matter whatever else surrounds us, whether it be storms or fires, earthquakes or cancer, wars or even genocide, because He is ours and we are His, we do have life—and that most abundantly, now and forevermore.