

## WEEKLY REFLECTION

### Easter 4C, 2022, John 10:22-30

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*Shepherding in life's wintry terrain*



Throughout history humanity and societies face wintry terrains, dark times; where is God in these times?

#### **1. Shepherding during the winters of ancient history**

We meet John's Jesus in Jerusalem in the winter during the Jewish Festival of Dedication, Hanukkah.

Why do we have this story after the resurrection, in this fourth week of Easter? As I have proposed in the last weeks, our lives are always in process between Good Friday's and Easter new life. Between winter and summer.

This story is set in the time of year when Israel is the rainy season. Winter begins in late

October and lasts through March. There is rarely snow, but temperatures are cool to cold and rain systems move in from the north. The life of shepherds caring for their flocks was challenging. People can find themselves in the winter of their lives.

Hanukkah originated out of a dark time in Jewish history, when in 175 BCE the Syrian king Antiochus planned to colonise all the land from Syria to Egypt, which included Judea. "The Jewish people resisted him, but he found support among segments of the Jewish aristocracy and priesthood." Antiochus desecrated the Temple and ordered the Jews to abandon the Torah and publicly worship the Greek gods, colonising their society, culture and faith.

People were persecuted and killed. In 164 BCE, Judas Maccabeus led a successful revolt against the Syrian forces. The Temple was rebuilt and refurbished, and it was rededicated. After this, the feast was celebrated yearly in winter as a thankful memory of God's presence and care. It was similar to the feast of Tabernacles, when Israel celebrated God's protection and care during its wilderness wandering in the Exodus.

This Festival of Lights which involves lighting of lamps celebrates the triumph of light over darkness, the shepherding nature of God and symbolised freedom from oppression, and the right to freely practice faith.

The writer of John's Gospel is aware of the winter of life, the dark times facing his early Christian communities in Asia Minor, around the end of the first century. It is evident in the Gospel that he is aware of the conflicts and divisions within the factions of the early church; of the clash and hostility with post-70s rabbinical Judaism; and of the challenge of living in a complex world comprising other religions, Hellenistic and Greek.

To shepherd the followers of Jesus, the writer of the Gospel retells the story of the historical Jesus to address all these challenges. This explains why this Gospel is so different to the other three. He presents this story of Jesus again through the story of the crucified-risen Christ. Giving his life, shepherding and confronting humanity with its blindness, and seeking to

In our text in John 10, we also find a social and political edge. The image, winter, reflects the cold and hostility of some of the “Jews” who challenge Jesus identity and mission. In John’s Gospel he is ejected from synagogues three times and later in this chapter they attempt to stone him.

We have to reject the anti-Semitism that has infected the church over the centuries; it was only a particular group of Jewish aristocracy and religious leaders who opposed and persecuted Jesus.

## **2. Shepherding life's wintry terrains at all levels of life**

In our story in John 10: 22-30, we need to ask why John’s Jesus connects the image of Jesus as shepherd with the Messiah, the Christ, the One sent from God. Ezekiel 34 combines the two notions. He presents the shepherd messiah as the One who would treat people differently to the political leaders of his day. As William Loader reminds us:

“Shepherding was a big metaphor which could encompass the vision of the reign of God with the full range of political, social, and personal dimensions which that entails. It is much bigger than ‘pastoral’ care, understood often in a very limited sense without the wider dimensions.”

If the Living Risen Spirit of Christ continues a shepherding presence in this larger way, we could say that this Spirit urges us to at shepherding holistically, at every level of life, inspiring us to work for the common good and to keep our political and institutional systems honest and genuine. This would certainly require a larger and more robust notion of God, Jesus and our growth towards more self. In last week’s reading in John 21, the crucified-risen Jesus leads Peter in a journey of greater self-understanding, only in this way empowering him to shepherd others.

Psychologically, interpreters suggest, the term "sheep" refers to that aspect of a person that instinctively is able to hear the shepherd's voice, and separate the truth from falsehood. The early church father, Origen, said that sheep represent our irrational and instinctual nature. This aspect of our psyche needs guidance, but also has the ability to separate the "true shepherd" from the false one.

At the same time, there are others--"thieves and bandits"--who call us to turn over our lives to them. This is seductive because it seemingly spares us from the hard work of healthy development of our inner life and self-understanding, developing the values of openness, inclusion and freedom. Why work on your psychological independence when you can turn the job over to someone else? As Isaiah 6 cautions, we can live ‘having eyes unseeing and ears unhearing’.

Those who do so can no longer hear the shepherd's voice. They are following their own "hired hand," i.e. they have subcontracted out the important psychological business of their own maturity.

The sheep not only hear the true shepherd's voice, but they also follow as the true shepherd leads the way into eternal life in the future, and abundant life--and mature psychology--right now.

## **3. Shepherding during the winters our lives**





Psalm 23, a shepherding psalm, is the best known of the psalms. It is a shepherding psalm containing powerful images of God's unseen, companioning presence with us in life's most wintry moments. When Jesus uses this pastoral image in John 10, his commitment to shepherding gains force when we realise sheep grazed in the open, harsh, Judean hills, always vulnerable to predators. And winter added its challenges.

Howard Wallace notes that in this psalm, the psalmist relates to God in a personal and intimate way, a trust that whatever life delivers, God accompanies us.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When bad things happen to good people*, shared in an interview that Psalm 23 is the answer to the question, "How do you live in a dangerous,

unpredictable, frightening world?" What inspired him to write his book was the death of his son, who was 14 years old and was born with an incurable illness. He said: "Where did we find the strength and the ability to raise him, to comfort him when he was sick and scared, and ultimately to lose him? And the only answer is, when we used up all of our own strength and love and faith, there really is a God, and [God] replenishes your love and your strength and your faith."

The Psalm inspired his faith. And in a true Rabbinical, dialectical fashion, inspired not just pious affirmation to trust God, but he implicitly suggests that when God shepherds you then you are truly empowered to shepherd and care for others.

On the one hand, he said,

"The role of God is not to explain and not to justify but to comfort, to find people when they are living in darkness, take them by the hand, and show them how to find their way into the sunlight again."

Then, on the other hand, he deals with why people get stuck and guilty, and in this way, empowered by his own faith, he deals with the self, the inner life and anxieties of people in despair and resignation.

We can never separate theology (who God is and is at work), and psychology (who we are in our complexity), or politics (the ways we construct society for the good of all, equality and justice)!

We are shepherded by the unseen yet present God, replenishing our love, faith and hope, opening our ears and eyes to replenish life abundantly at every level of life.