

A Storytelling Commentary on John 10:11-18

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The context of this discourse is the conversation that Jesus has with the Pharisees after the story of the man born blind. The story of the man born blind ends with the Pharisees asking Jesus, "Well, are we also blind?" Jesus says to them, "If you were blind, then you would have no sin, but since you say 'We see,' your blindness remains." That's the beginning of this discourse.

The argument between Jesus and the Pharisees reflects the situation that was present in the community of Israel after the Jewish War when the Pharisees were dominant. In the story of the man born blind (John 9) the Pharisees are in charge, so the audience of John is addressed as Pharisees. What that means is that the people who heard John 9 identified with the Pharisees and could be addressed as Pharisees. Pharisees were pious Jews who cared about the nation and their communities. They cared about God and the observance of the law of God. They were like Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, or Catholics. They are the people who are religious. They attend the synagogue services, observe the law, do what is right and good, and they care about it. They are not like the people who have nothing to do with religion or who are indifferent to it. They are who Jesus is talking to and he is talking to them in relation to how they will respond both in the priority of the healing of the man born blind, and also in their relationship with him.

The parable of the good shepherd is a very powerful metaphor of relationship between Jesus and the sheep. It develops the metaphor present in Ezekiel 34 (which I recommend you read). It begins with a condemnation of those who are false shepherds. God says to Ezekiel, "Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to the shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord God, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves. Shouldn't shepherds feed the sheep?'" Then later on, "'As I live', says the Lord God, 'because my sheep have become a prey and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals since there was no shepherd and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep but the shepherds have fed themselves and have not fed my sheep, therefore you shepherds hear the word of the Lord.' Thus says the Lord God, 'I am against the shepherds and I will demand my sheep from their hand and will put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer will the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths so that they may not be food for them.'"

And then, God identifies himself as the true shepherd. God says, "I myself will search for my sheep and I will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all of the places, which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and their thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and will bring them to their own land."

In the background of this discourse of Jesus is the promise that God will be the shepherd for the people and will bring them out of the lands to which they have been scattered by the Exile. God will then bring them back. Another part of the Ezekiel passage is, "I will make with them a covenant of peace and will banish wild animals from the land so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing and I will send down the showers in their season. They shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their blessing and the earth shall yield its increase." And at the end, "You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord God."

In Jesus' version of Ezekiel's shepherd parable, Jesus identifies himself in the role of God. Also, he makes it clear in the last part of the discourse, that the Father is the one who has sent him. He is doing God's work, but he is doing it at the Father's command. The contrast that is drawn between the good shepherd and the hired hand is that the hired hand runs away.

Also in the background of this discourse is the recent experience of the people of Israel—namely the Jewish War. During the war, people were brought together in Jerusalem. The Romans besieged them and many of the leaders ran away during the time when the Romans came back and attacked Israel. So the scattering of the people was something that they had experienced. They were scattered all over the known world and they were scattered in part because the ones who were responsible ran away. Jesus laid down his life. Now this reference to Jesus' laying down his life in John is on the one hand a prophecy of what Jesus will do. In the context of the community of Israel in 90-95 A.D., when the Gospel was first written and performed, they know that Jesus had already laid down his life. That had happened 60 years before. So the reflection of this discourse about the contrast between Jesus' love for the sheep, and the others who are not true shepherds but are bad shepherds, is made very clear.

Another part of context is that just prior to this Jesus says that all of those who have come before are thieves and *laistes*. The Greek word is translated as "robbers," but it is a reference to the Zealots, those who led the war. The word *laistes* meant revolutionaries, the insurrectionists, the brigands who stole to support the revolution. Jesus is contrasting himself with the Zealots who led the people into war and then either ran away or led them to be killed. In contrast, Jesus lays down his life for the sheep. Furthermore, it is a choice that he freely makes. This is not a choice of weakness. This is not a choice of his being a pacifist or of his being someone who didn't do anything or who was simply killed against his will. His choice is to lay down his life as a free gift, as an exercise of his own power. So when at the end of this discourse he says, "I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it up again," he was making it clear that this is not out of weakness. This is rather a choice about non-violent resistance. He lays down his life and as a result of that he has the authority and power to take it up again, that is, to be raised and to live with the people in the context of their new lives.

Another dimension of this speech is, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." Who does this refer to? In most of the commentaries and in the annotated Bibles such as Harper's, they say that this refers to the Gentiles. I do not think so. I think it refers to the various communities of Israel, the Samaritans, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the now forming group of Christians: apostolic Jews who believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is being portrayed here as the one who will bring together all of the sheep. It is a fulfillment of the prophecy in Ezekiel where God says, "I will bring back my sheep that have been scattered all over the world and I will bring them together so that they will be one." That's the promise that Jesus gives here: that he will reunify the people of Israel and that he will bring them together and they will be one flock under one shepherd. So this is a discourse of intense love that is politically and religiously focused in relation to the community of Israel, the Jews of the late first century.

When you tell this story, think of that context. Think also of the contexts in which the people to whom you are telling this story are experiencing warfare and being abandoned by their leaders, of being used by them, of being left alone. That is the experience common between people of the world now and the people to whom this discourse was addressed in the first century.