

**Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and
from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen**

One thing that is typical in the gospel of Mark is the frantic pace. Everything is happening, and everything is happening fast. If you read the gospel of Mark from beginning to end it leaves you a little breathless. He uses words like “immediately”, and “hurried”, and “rushed”, and “at once.”

The traditional symbol of the gospel of Mark is the Lion, and I like to think that like the lion, Mark is strong and powerful, and moves fast and efficiently. And today we have a good example of the hectic pace. From our reading you get the feeling that, things are a little out of control. That Jesus is at the center of enormous human attention and need.

Our gospel reading is also a little chopped up today. We skip from verse 34 to verse 53. The material we skipped is Jesus feeding the five thousand and Jesus walking on water. And we’ll actually read John’s version of the feeding of the five thousand next week.

Typically when our reading skips a little, it’s not so much about omitting things as much as it’s about focusing things. Today our attention is focused on the people’s response to Jesus. Where ever he goes, what ever he does, people are responding to him in droves. Jesus is like a rock star...

The metaphor that Jesus uses to describe the people is that “they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Sheep without a Shepherd...

Many of you may know this, some may not; I actually had sheep for fourteen years. We had forty ewes... Brad Deitner sold me my first few ewe lambs, back when we were in our thirty’s... I have to confess, I was not a good shepherd; and my thanks to Brad for helping me out, more times than I’d like to admit!

Sheep are good metaphors for people. There’s a saying among shepherds that a sick sheep is a dead sheep; they’re very needy! A good shepherd has to be constantly watching and assessing what’s going on. If one little treatable problem goes undetected, bad things happen. A sick sheep is a dead sheep...

Sheep are also flocking animals; they stick together... They’re basically defenseless. Their only protection is to be part of a flock... When you watch sheep graze, they’re funny animals. They will wander away from each other one blade of grass at a time.

Then one of them will baa alarmingly, and then they will all stand at alert and rush together again, only to repeat the same thing over and over again... I guess you could say they're not too smart!

During the time of Jesus, sheep had some additional and very particular meanings. Sheep were a vital part of the culture. Fatted lambs were important for food, wool of course for clothing, and now here is something we typically don't think about-- unblemished lambs were necessary for sacrifice.

If you needed God's forgiveness, you would go to the temple, buy a lamb from a handy money changer, give it to the priest and he would ritualistically slaughter it, splash blood on all sides of the altar, arrange the parts on wood and turn the whole thing into smoke.

It's all right there in the first chapter of Leviticus; it's called a sacrifice of atonement. Can you imagine all that blood and violence! If you were seeking God's forgiveness, that's what you did! Yuck! Thank goodness, we don't do that anymore!

According to a growing number of scholars, sacrificial practices have their origins in scapegoating. Imagine living in a small community thousands of years ago, you have the problem of human coveting, lots of competing wants and desires, leading to rivalry, tension, people being fearful and ornery. Pressure mounting... Then someone notices the rancor and suggests that God must be punishing them.

Nervously, they all start looking at each other and wondering who God is angry with. Then someone makes an accusation and points the finger, "it's all because of that person." And out of fear, mob contagion breaks out, and everyone agrees. The person is probably completely innocent, but it doesn't matter, the group believes he is guilty and they kill him.

And magically, the tension is gone. They interpret their new harmony as a sign that God had forgiven them, and exactly because of the killing. And for that community in that occurrence, God's blessing and forgiveness has been welded to their act of violence, to their act of sacrifice.

Now, imagine this scenario being played out many, many times, over thousands and thousands of years. The practice of human sacrifice is almost a universal phenomenon. It has appeared in almost every culture at some time in its history. Even in the pre-Christian or pagan religions of Scandinavia.

Scholars have noted that the Old Testament even has a story where the sacrificial tendency was transferred from people to animals. It's the story of Abraham almost sacrificing Isaac, and when God provided a Ram.

The connection between the practice of sacrificing and pleasing God and receiving forgiveness is strong in the Old Testament. And it was very much present during Jesus time. That's why we have the metaphor of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Do you see that?

In our gospel reading, when Jesus says the people are like sheep without a shepherd, it's not a cute or quaint thing, it's all about neurotic and defenseless people, running every which looking for security. Jesus feels compassion for the people and begins to teach them and heal them of many diseases. One of the diseases that Jesus comes to heal is the fever in our blood to point our fingers at one another and crucify each other.

Quick story - I have a Facebook friend that I've known since childhood. For purposes of the story I'll call him Michael, which isn't his real name. When we were young our families spent a lot of time together so he's also Facebook friends with my mom and brothers and sister. Recently Michael was ranting about a politician, and saying some incredibly disrespectful things.

One of my brothers, who probably even voted the same way he did, made some comment about being respectful. To me it seemed wise. I value respect so I pushed the "like" button, I didn't say anything.

I later learned that Michael and a mob of his like-minded friends ganged up on my brother and started calling him stupid and ignorant. And of course, all on-line... My mom, who is a face book junkie, saw this and apparently commented, "Michael, stop calling people names." I'm sure my mom would have said the same thing when we were all little kids.

Then apparently Michael and his mob of his like-minded friends started calling my mom all kinds of names. My 80 plus year old mom said to me, "I didn't know what to do; I've never been attacked like that before." Face book can be very destructive!

Later that afternoon, Michael sent my whole family a personal message saying in effect that we were all terrible people, called us all names, and interestingly, he used religious language, and he said, "May God have mercy on all of you and good riddance." He then expelled all of us; he un-friended my whole family.

My mom was devastated. She wanted to write Michael a letter and apologize. I encouraged her not to. To me, it seemed a little like Jesus apologizing for being crucified. This scapegoating – judging and expelling and crucifying one another is still with us...

And I have to wonder, is this really God's intention for us?

And I have to say-- Absolutely not! Jesus died *exactly* to our murderous tendencies, *exactly* so that we can see ourselves in a mirror... We are no longer like sheep without a shepherd, because Jesus is the good shepherd; he laid down his life for our sake. Every time we are judgmental and finger pointing it's about seeing Jesus blood on our own hands. And we repent... This is how the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world.

And the good news today is that this is God's work and God's intention. Jesus came to lead us out of our murderous ways, and into a way of eternal life... This is the ultimate healing that the whole world desperately needs and wants, today, more than ever...

Jesus is the healing and the unity amidst our diversity. We are all saints and sinners... We all see the world a little differently... That's how God made us... We are all forgiven... We are all loved and cherished... And we are all called to love each other despite, and especially amidst our differences.

And this is a critically important thing that we have to offer the world. When the world out there thinks it's right and justifiable to crucify each other, we are different...

And so, now, what am I going to do about my friend Michael? Do you think I should send him a message telling him how stupid and mean he is? Probably not...

I'll miss him, I'll suffer his violent judgment... and I'll wait for reconciliation and resurrection. Because, you see this is my hope... I believe in resurrection and I believe in reconciliation... and I'll continue to love him... And while he felt justified to expel me, I will not expel him...

And I can trust the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world...

Because, like those people who were clamoring to see Jesus way back when, we need that healing today more than ever, and I believe in it! Amen.