

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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IV Easter, John 10:11-18

“Alleluia! Christ is risen!”
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

[Alright, friends – a prologue: This is one of those sermons that alternates between a story and a theological reflection in response to this week’s Gospel – all without a lot of directive stitching between the two. The strategy intends to spark wondering about where we are going and to make room for *your* ideas and *your* connections, and not mine alone. Not everything must fit perfectly, and I invite you to rest easy along the ride, indulge suspense rather than frustration, and trust conclusions will come.]

My 1980 Oldsmobile stalled at stoplights.

One of three Delta 88s I owned as a teenager and young adult, this was *not* the cool one, that black-and-white 1973 coupe fondly named “The Princess” as I have previously recalled from this pulpit. Nor was it the minty-mint, navy-blue-with-a-white-vinyl-top, 1981 marshmallow my grandmother generously passed among my sisters and me. No, this was the \$500 four-door I bought during the summer after I graduated high school, bought from a guy¹ who had driven it hard-hard-hard and put it away wet, ripped, and scarred. Nicknamed “Wo-Mo” – short for “Werther’s Original Mobile,”² an homage to its color scheme³ – I immediately crammed its sun-dried dash with the cheapest Kraco⁴ tape deck the Auto Shack sold.⁵

Because Shreveport retail outlets⁶ did not stock the *cool* bumper stickers⁷ I saw on *Friday Night Videos* (the late-night, NBC program for us who did not have access to The MTVs),⁸ I cut out my favorite bands’ names, album titles, and photographs from my LPs’ gatefolds,⁹ CDs’ long-box packaging,¹⁰ and *Rolling Stone* magazines.¹¹ I then arranged the images inside the Wo-Mo’s back window and atop its package tray into what turned out to be an angsty diorama¹² – a precious and pitiful testimony to the prove-it pressure of that fraught gate opening into the fields of collegiate independence. Ohhhh, how I hoped the Dinosaur Jr. and the Public Enemy and the Neil Young images¹³ would signal to my future classmates that my Louisiana license plate did not say everything there was to say about me. And with my long hair, pierced ear, and questionable fashion decisions, I labored to convince myself of the same.

In the fourth week of every Easter season, we mark “Good Shepherd Sunday.” On each of these occasions, we pray the Twenty-third Psalm (or sing “The King of love my shepherd is”) and we

read one-third of the Good Shepherd teaching in the tenth chapter of John's Gospel. This year, we hear that speech's center section, which follows Jesus describing himself as the "gate."¹⁴ Just before today's appointment begins, Jesus explains, "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."¹⁵

Jesus then distinguishes himself from "the thief" who slinks malevolently among the flock.¹⁶ See, Jesus does not seek his own benefit, he comes *on behalf of the sheep*, "that *they* may have life, and have it more abundantly."¹⁷ Indeed, as today's appointment opens, Jesus self-identifies as "the *good* shepherd," the one who stays with the sheep in times of peril,¹⁸ who cares for them,¹⁹ who speaks with an honorable voice.²⁰ He continues, "I have [others] that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also ... So there will be one flock, one shepherd."²¹

By the Wo-Mo's first weekend in my family's driveway, two of its whitewalls were almost completely flat, sending me to Pipes U-Pull-It salvage with what remained of my paycheck from the Little League whose fields I mowed and lined. Among the selection of used tires that would fit my 14" rims, I found only one matched pair, which were considerably larger than the other two still holding up the Delta 88. No problem, I moved the smalls to the front, and installed the tall on the back,²² giving the Wo-Mo a hot-rod-ish stance.

After a brief negotiation, one of the guys behind the Pipes counter²³ cut me a deal on a beaded seat cover I'd pulled out of a wreck in the yard.²⁴ In addition to my looking totally far out, those beads kept me from sitting directly on the springs poking through the yellow foam hemorrhaging from the driver-seat's shredded fabric.²⁵ With the Wo-Mo now decorated and lifted, I returned home and washed, polished, and waxed that car within an inch of its life.

"Mid-Century-Modern"²⁶ theologian Paul Tillich distinguishes between "revelation" and "religion."²⁷ Revelation moves from God to humankind, while religion moves from humankind toward God [neither likely travelling in a 1980 Olds, I should acknowledge]. "Revelation" sets us in a posture of openness, with the task of receiving the Good Shepherd's outreach to us. "Religion" presents us in a posture of pursuit, with the task of reaching out toward God.

Regarding this morning's Gospel lesson and all the Christian scriptures, for that matter, Tillich explains "Every passage [is] both revelation and religion."²⁸ The Bible is a document [of] the divine [manifestation]" – *revelation* – "and of the way in which human beings have received it" – *religion*. "And it is not that some words and sentences belong to the former [category] and others to the latter but that in one and the same passage revelation and [religion] are inseparably united."²⁹ See, the Gospels do not speak solely as objective truth, even as we value their proximity to Jesus. Rather, the scriptures contribute an inaugural testimony that necessarily reflects the context of its authors, the context of its editors, and *even the context of Jesus himself*.

In a related dyad, later twentieth-century theologian John Macquarrie notes the ambiguity of the expression, “the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” On the one hand, we may understand it as an *objective* statement referring to the gospel proclaimed *about* Jesus Christ.³⁰ This understanding aligns more with revelation – Christ coming into the world from God, as God, to lay down his life for the flock – and the stories of Jesus become sacred as parcel to God’s revelation through him. This Gospel prioritizes believers’ acceptance of and devotion to that revelation’s singular truth.

On the other hand, we may understand “the Gospel of Jesus Christ” as a *subjective* expression, a reference to the Good News “proclaimed *by* [Jesus]” – not “*about* Jesus,” but “*by* Jesus.” The gospels’ “content is the [reign] of God and its advent upon earth,”³¹ and this understanding aligns more with the idea of the bible as an expression of “religion,” a story of the sheep as much as the shepherd – of Jesus’ movement toward God and the disciples account of their experience with him as they moved together toward the same. This gospel prioritizes believers’ *actively* joining Jesus’ advance of God’s reign.

I expect the record would reveal I did not rebuild the Wo-Mo’s carburetor *every* Saturday, though, looking back, it sure feels like I did. That little two-barrel found itself caught between the changed emissions laws of the 1970s and standardized fuel-injection, and it never ran right. No matter how many times I pulled its spaghetti of vacuum hoses from the intake; bathed its throttle body in a Berryman’s bucket of (almost certainly carcinogenic) miracle sauce;³² and then carefully abided the Chilton’s directions to reinstall the whole assembly; the Wo-Mo would still die at idle if “under load” – meaning “stopped while in Drive.”

As many will appreciate, stopping-while-in-Drive is not an uncommon scenario during the operation of a motor vehicle. Therefore, I was constantly throwing the automatic transition into “Neutral” at every red light and working the accelerator to sustain a high enough RPM to keep that engine running. Then, once the light turned to green, I would throw her back into Drive, usually with a leap and rubber left on the road. All this commotion caused my girlfriend at the time to blush, though, thankfully, not enough to keep her from marrying me a few years later.³³

Macquarrie laments, “Every cultural mood sharpens our perception of some [scriptural] matters, but it seems to do so only at the expense of dulling our awareness of [others].”³⁴ I receive this tendency as a feature, not a glitch of our faith: the Gospels offer not only the story of Jesus and the disciples, but now these two-thousand years of study and reflection by their successors and our forebearers. The fact of these treasured tales’ passage through time with so many and varied readings, rightly encourages our humility when considering the innovations of our day and inspires our wonder when encountering the richness of our tradition.

Even so, many of the Christians with whom I grew up took a “God said it, that settles it” approach to the bible. They received scripture as the unassailable, inerrant Word *of* God, *by* God, and they were wolves toward anyone whose actions or ideas disagreed with how they read the

print on the page. As Tillich notes, “[This basic error of fundamentalism] overlooks the contribution [of religion] in the revelatory situation and consequentially [mistakes] one individual and conditioned form of receiving the divine *with the divine itself*,”³⁵ that is, fundamentalism can attach to a single faith expression – a single bible verse, a single social issue, a single theological position – and declare *it, God*.

To feel the heat of that energy is scary and unsettling.

Even with all its “character,” the Wo-Mo brought me to San Antonio,³⁶ where I started college, and got me to Baton Rouge, where I would finish.³⁷ In spirit and in substance, that car – the raucous mixed tapes on its crummy stereo, the trying-too-hard images in its rear window, the gasoline in its tank – promised a way out of the conservative-Christian parochialism I endured growing up. And when I imagined where that car might take me, I dreamed of Boston! Of Philadelphia, of New York: as I saw those cities from my carport, they were fields without fences, communities who encouraged open-mindedness, creativity, and curiosity.³⁸

Despite my optimism and the many and varied flashes of divinity that Christian scripture and tradition continue to set all along our path, these several decades and thousands of miles later, the Wo-Mo still threatens to stall at a single stoplight; going nowhere in Neutral, now it revs its engine with judgement intending division rather than union. Macquarrie warns, “To present [Jesus] as only or even primarily a political revolutionary is utterly inadequate . . . The fullness of the gospel is neither an ethical-political exhortation separated from the truth that God was in Christ, nor is it a message of personal [salvation without regard for the social] implications of such a message.”³⁹

See, too often our prideful, New England progressivism now deploys the same polemical tactics as the very conservatism it once claimed to challenge, treating individual political positions as *revelation* – unassailable, inerrant – and enforcing absolute purity with a cruelty to rival Evangelicalism. Self-interested ideologues now take to their opposing bunkers – North and South, Democrat and Republican, Christian and secular, however you want to cast our divisions – each side claiming the righteousness of the divine and prowling their ideas’ perimeter with blood on their lips, flesh in their teeth, and delight in destruction rather than grace.

We cower to prove-it peer-pressures not so different than those of our teenage years. We seek acceptance in our preferred cult by carefully assembling our social media dioramas. We seek to divide ourselves from our neighbors by planting signs on our curbs. In our hyper-partisanship, stridency becomes the currency of worthiness and compassion the coinage of weakness. Dangerously, we *dehumanize* any who would dare disagree with us.

Ohhhh, the world aches for the Church to transcend this merciless madness!⁴⁰

Modeling a righteousness without wrath, Jesus gathers all the sheep into a single fold – not by either the selfishness of the “hired hand” or the violence of “the thief,” but by constancy, invitation, and trustworthiness: “I know my own and my own know me . . . they will listen to my voice.”⁴¹ As the *good* shepherd, Jesus tends the sheep with understanding wherever they are, whether caught in the bramble of bad ideas or lost in the weeds of their myopia.

Jesus unites the flock by welcoming diversity and generosity, rather than demanding conformity by contempt and compulsion. Therefore, we join the Good Shepherd’s welcome. We nurture humility, and we meet one another where we are. We dare wonder before the great curiosities of existence and of our moment, alike. We share in God’s grace, and we seek healing and peace near and far.

We build an ever more Beloved Community
as companions in this holy household of God.

Amen.

¹ He lived in that neighborhood between Youree Drive and Fern Avenue – I think I could drive to the carport today, though I don’t remember the address.

² Werther’s Originals’ hard candies were a little too sweet and a little too big, but I do love caramels (the simple squares wrapped in “Kraft”-printed cellophane remain the best). I believe a tip of the cap is due to AMS, who gave the car its glad name.

³ Orangey-brown paint, slightly lighter brown vinyl top, with a more-or-less matching, lighter-brown interior.

⁴ Kraco was the bottom-of-the-barrel of aftermarket car stereos, but I had to have a tape deck. My world revolved around the mixed tapes I was constantly making – I should have had stock in Maxell.

⁵ I looked it up, and the “Auto Shack” changed its name to “Auto Zone” in 1987, so, I guess I went to the Auto Zone to get the radio, though it was still “The Shack” in my head.

⁶ I dreamed of Tower Records.

⁷ I did join Greenpeace during my senior year of high school, which netted me the “Think Globally, Act Locally” classic, a simple sentiment that still informs my practical theology.

⁸ In time, basic cable would make it out to our neighborhood – still no MTV, but we did have TBS and USA, providing access to *Night Tracks* and *Night Flight*, respectively.

⁹ This is a 100% true story. As a person still known to clean his CD jewel boxes and meticulously keep them in alphabetical order, be clear that I would not ordinarily take scissors to my collection, not even in a situation of this urgency. However, a neighbor my parents’ age had recently given me their LP collection. Among the handful of albums was a well-loved copy of *Led Zeppelin II*, which had no vinyl inside. So I did cut its carboard – a worthy second act for the treasure.

¹⁰ I always saved the [longboxes](#) to tack to the bulletin board in my bedroom.

¹¹ The *Rolling Stone* effort really didn't work – the pages were too thin.

¹² Because the Scotch tape didn't hold, the heavier bottom edges would detach from the rear window, and then rest on the package tray, with the top still attached to the window.

¹³ In the mystery of how such things pass through life's filters, our move to Boston surfaced some of these sun-bleached, cardboard bits: portions of Neil Young's *Decade*, PE's *Apocalypse '91*, and Dinosaur Jr's *Whatever's Cool With Me*.

¹⁴ John 10:9a.

¹⁵ John 10:9b.

¹⁶ John 10:1,8,10a.

¹⁷ John 10:10b.

¹⁸ John 10:12.

¹⁹ John 10:13.

²⁰ John 10:16, from this morning's lesson, though also 10:3-5, in the earlier section.

²¹ John 10:16. I omitted the phrase "and they will listen to my voice," having referenced it in the previous sentence.

²² There wasn't clearance to turn the wheels if the larger ones were on the front.

²³ I have to think it was a Brantley, the family who operated that yard and who were members of the first parish I served as a priest – terrific humans.

²⁴ Pretty sweet seat cover, actually, and they threw in a window crank to replace the one missing from the passenger door panel.

²⁵ I think of all the precautions I now take to avoid hazardous chemicals, but the damage is already done, man. God knows what I've been exposed to working on cars and wrenching in salvage yards.

²⁶ "MCM" as The Craigslist advertises.

²⁷ Tillich, Paul. *Biblical Religion And The Search For Ultimate Reality*. The University of Chicago Press, 1955. A slight volume comprising Tillich's 1951-1952 lectures at the University of Virginia, I especially appreciated his ideas about "The Reciprocal Character of the Divine-Human Relationship." In shortest form, he argues that when a person cannot act freely in their relationship with another person, the "I-thou" relationship becomes objectified as "I-thing." On this principle, he proposes that humankind's God-granted freedom suggests our actions affect God. The logical dependency this attaches to God does not undermine God's supremacy. Related to this sermon, Tillich proposes "This free reciprocity between God and man is the root of the dynamic character of biblical religion" (30).

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 3-4. "It is always revelation for someone and for a group in a definite environment, under unique circumstances. Therefore, [the one] who witnesses to it in terms of [their] individuality and in terms of the social and spiritual conditions in which the revelation has been manifested to them. In other words, they [do] it in terms of their religion."

²⁹ Ibid, p. 4.

³⁰ Macquarrie, John. *Thinking About God*. Harper & Row, New York, 1975. I refer to pages 52-57.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 55.

³² See endnote 26.

³³ Missy's memories of the Wo-Mo are not especially fond. She recalls that I would require her to jump out of the car as it moved slowly by Miller Dorm, but I'm hoping that's not true.

³⁴ Macquarrie, p. 54.

³⁵ Tillich, p. 4.

³⁶ And I drove it a lot that year, man: diners, flea markets, record stores, taco stands.

³⁷ During the spring of my freshman year, I sold it for \$750 and swapped out to a 1983 Datsun with electric windows and door locks.

³⁸ And distorted guitars. As the great band Lucero sings: I was "just another Southern boy who dreams of nights in NYC." I mean, Boston had The Pixies, The Lemonheads, Buffalo Tom – a land of hope and dreams, indeed.

³⁹ Macquarrie, pp. 56, 57.

⁴⁰ Even if the world doesn't know it's the Church it needs to model this now way of living together.

⁴¹ John 10:14b, 16b, from this morning's lesson, though also 10:3-5, in the earlier section.