



PASTOR'S ANNIVERSARY LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - 1 Peter 5:1-4 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you (v. 2) to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it --not for sordid gain but eagerly. (v. 3) Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. (v. 4) And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The Pastor's Anniversary commemorates the starting date of a pastor's relationship with a local congregation. It remains a unique moment in the life of a congregation because of the historic role of the pastor in the African American church. In Slave Religion: The

Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South, Professor Al Raboteau helps us understand the unique role of the African American pastor that gives way to this liturgical moment. Raboteau describes the plantation context out of which the “slave preacher” arose. By presiding over rituals and celebrations like baptisms, funerals, and weddings in the context of slavery, the preacher affirmed that slave lives had meaning beyond the definitions set by slavery and objected to the conditions that denied freedom to God’s people.¹ This affirmation of humanity amidst oppressive sociocultural conditions garnered special appreciation and respect for the pastoral role. As such, the pastor has traditionally been an influential figure and prominent symbol of service in the African American community. From pastors who led slave rebellions to pastors who led the civil rights movement, history is replete with examples of shepherds who served God’s people courageously and sacrificially.

Today, many pastors continue to serve in this tradition and, in doing so, the pastor continues to function in numerous capacities as: preacher, prophet, activist, advocate, community organizer, teacher, liturgist, comforter of the bereaved, counselor, administrator and even janitor if necessary. These varied roles require tremendous gifts and remarkable service. The Pastor’s anniversary is an opportunity to offer gratitude to God for the calling and gifts to serve God’s people.

It should also be noted that the occasion is an opportune time to foster unity and cohesion in the church as the community celebrates the mission and vision of the congregation which the pastor serves. The moment can serve as a milestone to help the congregation assess its past, its present, and imagine its future. In this way, the pastor’s anniversary does more than lift up the personality and gifts of the pastor, but it is a day to inspire service and encourage *all* to embrace their God-given gifts and calling.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: I Peter 5:1-4

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The electronic media has given access to a plethora of pastoral models and ministries which have evoked the wrath of critics who question the opulent lifestyle and teachings of pastors who champion financial prosperity as a hallmark of the Gospel. The “Grassley Six” investigation of the financial conduct of six prominent pastors is one example of the scrutiny to which pastors have been subjected. Scandals of financial misconduct and sexual immorality provide reason to believe that there are some pastors who satisfy a self-gratifying ego at the expense of caring for the flock. For this reason, some will suggest putting a pause on the Pastor’s Anniversary.

However, there are alternative models of pastoral leadership worth celebrating. I still believe that the majority of pastors serve the church with integrity and faithfulness. These pastors convene a space where people are free to discover and exercise their gifts in service. They care for the sick, pray with the dejected and shepherd with love, humility and courage. Contrary to the ministry models one may scrutinize on the internet or TV, most pastors serve congregations with a worship attendance of less than 100.² Many

pastors are dedicated servants who inspire us to use our gifts and live out our own call to serve. We would do well *not* to let a few bad apples spoil the bunch.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

I exhort the elders among you - “I exhort” or “I appeal” (Gr. *parakaleo*) is often used in New Testament epistles to indicate the beginning of final remarks (Romans 15:30; I Corinthians 16:15; Hebrew 13:22).³ The final remarks in this letter, attributed to Peter, are addressed to an audience of Jewish and (predominantly) Gentile converts in first century Asia Minor. These early Christians had been subject to hostility because of their faith (1:6ff, 2:12; 3:16; 4:4;12ff). As such, there is a tone of apocalyptic urgency exercised in this letter. Peter understood “the end of all things near” and uses household codes, a prominent literary form in the letter, to outline the duties of various members of the household. The household codes define how the community should discipline itself as a witness to others in the last days.⁴ Our passage picks up on these household codes; only, the passage is a code for the household of faith, and Peter directs the message toward the elders.

(v. 1) *Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you* - Peter identifies himself as a “fellow elder” (Gr. *sympresbyteros*) and a witness to the sufferings of Christ. In doing so, he establishes apostolic credibility and pastoral collegiality. He is a co-elder or co-pastor *with* his audience. Therefore, the exhortation that follows is an exhortation to all elders, including the writer. The significance of such collegiality is worth noting. Faithful pastoring is a collaborative work. Pastors need relationships that provide accountability, and they need genuine partnership with those who will serve and care for the flock with them.

(v. 2a) *to tend the flock of God that is in your charge* - The exhortation to pastors is to “tend the flock of God that is in your charge.” The appeal to tend the flock of God echoes the imperative Jesus gives Peter in John 20:16-17 (“tend my sheep,” “feed my lambs”). The key phrase is “flock of God,” a critical reminder that the pastor tends a flock that is God’s flock. Peter’s emphasis recalls that of the biblical prophets (e.g., “the Lord’s flock,” Jeremiah 13:17; “the Lord God the Almighty will watch over his flock,” Zechariah 10:3).⁵ While the pastor acts as caretaker, Christ is the chief shepherd (5:4). The language of “my church,” “my choir,” or “my deacons” can deceive some pastors into thinking that the flock is in their ultimate care. But Peter helps us maintain a proper perspective. The flock that the pastor tends is ultimately in God’s care. The church is God’s church. The members are God’s members. Pastors who practice this truth are wise elders. They can endure many storms and transitions because they understand that the flock belongs finally to God.

(v. 2b) *exercising the oversight* – This imperative interprets *how* one shall tend the flock. To exercise oversight is to watch over and care for the people and ministry of the congregation. “Oversight” is a word that works well with the flock metaphor because it connotes vision. Sheep are known to have good peripheral vision, but poor depth

perception and poor depth perception creates a challenge for a flock's forward movement. The pastor who provides oversight for the flock "sees over," looking ahead and guiding the flock toward opportunities for pasture as well as guiding the flock away from dangerous predators in their path. As the shepherd tends the flock, so a pastor tends the congregation.

Not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it --not for sordid gain but eagerly. (v. 3) *Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock* - Peter makes clear that a pastor's oversight is not about "lording over" (see also Jesus' word to the disciples Mark 10:42, Matthew 20:25) but "seeing over." The pastor is faithful when modeling the role of a chief servant, versus a chief lord. Such service should be exercised "not under compulsion but willingly." This is to say that pastors are called to tend the flock out of gratitude and not obligation, without begrudging complaints, but with dedication and humility. Certainly, pastors will experience good days and bad days, but Peter helps us to keep in mind that the faithful pastor is a glad servant, who does not serve for self-satisfaction or gain. "Ministry all too often can become a compulsive act of self-gratification. Peter wants it instead to be a free and joyous response to God's love."⁶ The point is that the pastor tending God's flock is to be disciplined not only in outward demonstrations of care, but in his/her inward disposition towards the flock.

(v. 4) *And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away* - For Peter's audience, the crown would have conjured up images of the wreath received by champions of ancient Greco-Roman games. However, Peter speaks about a different crown, the crown *of glory*. This crown of glory is not conferred by an earthly empire, but conferred by the heavenly authority. The glory referred here is the same glory that is referenced throughout I Peter, the glory revealed in Jesus Christ (1:7, 4:13-14, and 5:1). The crown of glory then is a promise and reward for all who serve Jesus Christ, the chief shepherd, redeemer, and liberator. This reward does not suggest the pastor as a model of perfection - a shepherd par excellence deserving of the crown. Surely every pastor who strives to be a faithful servant of God's flock will fail to live up to the standards of the chief shepherd. Yet, the grace of God covers our failures and pastors are called to faithfully tend God's flock with persistent dedication, discipline, gratitude, and humility until the "chief shepherd appears."

So, today, we celebrate pastors everywhere who:

1. Stand in the lineage of those who affirmed our humanity amidst the oppression of slavery, Reconstruction and Jim Crow;
2. Serve congregations faithfully regardless of the size of the church;
3. Can endure the storms of ministry because they know God controls the Church;
4. Guide congregations toward opportunities for green pastures and away from danger;
5. Serve willingly and not for self-gratification or gain;
6. Though not perfect, serve the Chief Shepherd with dedication, discipline and humility.

Celebration

Christ has a crown of glory for those who serve and tend God's flock faithfully! It is not winning the membership drive, entering the ranks of a certain income bracket, nor maintaining power and prominence in the world which certify candidates for the crown. Christ confers the crown to those whom he can offer the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord." (Matthew 25:21 -NKJV). The Master's joy is joy that the world can't give, and the world can't take away!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: The pasture, sheep grazing, the shepherd's staff, crown;

Sounds: The "bah bah" of the sheep, sounds of nature, the shepherd's voice; and

Smells: The odor of the flock, the sweat of the shepherd.

III. Other Suggestions

- Dr. Martin Luther King's sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct," offers material on the character of servant leadership, making it a relevant and helpful resource for the congregation and its pastoral leaders.
- The shepherd/flock metaphor in I Peter 5:1-4 is a rich symbol and a great source for sermon illustrations. A helpful resource for illustrations regarding this metaphor can be found at www.sheep101.info/201/behavior.html. This site outlines sheep behavior that resonates with congregational life.
- *Careful Caveat:* If a pastor has a spouse and/or child(ren), the congregation and the pastor might consider acknowledgement of the family during a Pastoral anniversary. This consideration is a contextual one. For instance, a family member might opt to forego acknowledgement. However, the consideration recognizes that pastors' partner with their families in order to serve faithfully in their call.

Notes

1. Raboteau, Al. Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978. p. 232.
2. Chaves, Mark Chaves. Congregations in America. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. p. 18.

3. Bartlett, David. The New Interpreter's Bible: Hebrews - Revelation (Volume 12). Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998. p. 314.
4. Perkins, Pheme. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: First and Second Peter, James, and Jude. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995. p. 50.
5. Ramsey, Michael J. Word Biblical Commentary : 1 Peter. Dallas, TX: Word Inc., 2002. p. 282.
6. Id. at 284.