

As prepared for delivery:

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There are significant and terrifying lions in our world. This lion is the devil, powerful, evil.

So often, when we read 1 Peter, we do not get to the lions. In many of our readings of 1 Peter 5 and especially in relation to leadership, we stop with the call to be a shepherd.Â

But that is not how this letter works. This chapter unpacks for us what the call of a shepherd and of the whole community under their care really entails.Â

If being a good shepherd is about tending the flock, resisting the lions roaming around seeking to devour the sheep is at the heart of the job description.

Peter is clear that our proper stance toward this lion is watchful, clear-headed resistance. The command is to “keep alert”. There is no option for laziness or complacency: a key, core part of being a good shepherd is resisting the adversary, the roaring lion.

What are the roaring lions of injustice in our communities? Who - or what - is the adversary?Â

For contemporary Christians in the global church, those forces which stand for all that is evil are numerous and should be named, as they have been in the testimonies we have been listening to.Â

We have, in previous sessions, considered the tendency to tell those who are suffering to keep quiet and to endure. Jesus’ radical call in this final chapter of 1 Peter is to confront the lions, to resist the adversary, to protect the flock.

So what does it mean to be a shepherd in 1 Peter and how does that relate to our understandings of being a shepherds to God’s flock?

“A shepherd is like a walking Jesus who radiates the love of Christ.”

1 Peter was written before the solidifying of ministry into a three-fold order of bishop, presbyter, and deacon. Unlike other New Testament writings, Peter does not use the noun “bishop” (episkopos).Â

Instead, 1 Peter prefers the term “elder”. It’s a neutral term. It can be translated as both female and male elders. It designates people who are older within the congregation, and possibly people who are older in the faith.

Peter calls himself a "fellow elder", rather than an apostle, teacher, or spiritual father. In choosing the same title as those to whom he is writing, Peter signals his common cause with them. He writes to them as one of them, exhorting them as a fellow elder rather than commanding them as one in authority.

The verb "to shepherd" echoes the command to Peter at the end of John's Gospel to shepherd and nurture the flock of Jesus. It calls to mind Jesus' own teaching about the nature of the "good shepherd" in John 10.1-18: the shepherd who lays down his life for the flock, whose sheep know his voice, who knows his sheep by name, and who leads his sheep out to pasture.

The shepherd is also the one who searches for the lost sheep. The shepherd is both pastor and evangelist. This is a call to a demotion rather than a promotion within the ancient world.

Shepherding also calls for relationship. This is what allows for flourishing.

Peter follows this call to "tend the flock" with three ways that such shepherding should happen.

The shepherding is not to be done by compulsion, nor for gain, nor by lording it over those in their charge. Shepherding the flock is to be undertaken willingly, eagerly, and should set an example.

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Peter takes the imitation of Christ one step further through the image of the shepherd, calling the elders to be examples to the flock of the good shepherd who washes the feet of his disciples and challenges the injustice of the empire by laying down his life on behalf of his friends.

The verb exhorting them to "be examples" is better understood as "becoming examples", which is active and a process. The elders must continue to learn and grow to continue to be patterns for the rest of the believers.

Ultimately, elders remain members of the flock, shepherded themselves by "the chief shepherd". They stand in a liminal space: they are both sheep and shepherd, both needing guidance and called to guide.

Only Christ is chief shepherd. Only God in Christ can help them know, name and resist the lions. The lion is all that seeks to kill and limit life for those in our world, all that seeks to reduce the quality of life.

Elders should also practice humility. Humility changes the face of power. Before God, all are humbled; no one is exalted, except by God's own actions. Peter's exhortation to humility echoes the teaching of Jesus in the gospels: "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matt. 23.12).

Peter immediately connects humility with the casting off of anxiety. Letting go of anxiety is an act of humility.

Many translations read "cast all your anxiety on him": a more accurate translation is "casting all your anxieties on him". Casting our anxieties on God is an act of humbling ourselves before God. We acknowledge that God has the strength and wisdom that we do not, and we entrust ourselves, our sufferings, to Him.

Peter reminds the community that they do not face persecution alone. They are part of a persecuted community that spans the Roman Empire, and they are reminded of their solidarity.

Their unity in Christ overcomes all division and threat, even as they suffer. They do not suffer alone, nor do they resist alone.

This letter balances the call to resilience in situations of vulnerability and marginalisation, and the call to resistance from positions of power and when authority has been given.

Here at the end, we are invited to join God in his activity of resistance in order to build community.

In our world today, we need to take care not to imply that there is one right way to respond to suffering. The testimony of those in the midst of suffering is almost always different from those observing from the outside.

So how do we protect the flock and keep alert?

The role of a leader is to create unity, not division.

Division makes the lion's job easier. It makes it easy to pick off the weak and all those vulnerable to attack.

One of our primates has not only been a herds boy in a place where there are lions threatening the flock, but he has also been part of two close encounters with lions.

The lion was fought and defeated in a situation of absolute confusion and chaos. Except those taking on the lion are united in their confusion. They are united in their chaos.

Unity is chaotic. Unity can be confusing, because unity doesn't mean we all agree.

But we are united in Christ.

We are united against the lion.

We are united in protecting God's flock, given to us.

Unity is needed even in the midst of chaos (of our own making!) to defeat the roaring lion.

And the role of a shepherd is to be a leader, an exemplar, who is humble and finds their strength and hope in the chief shepherd.

For ultimately the story of how to take on a roaring lion, of how to protect the flock, of how to lead as one of the elders, is a story of unity and solidarity, even in the midst of confusion and chaos.

Unity in Christ overcomes all division and threat.Â

Peter ends by returning once again to the central themes of hope, suffering, and glory in Christ. His final call is one of reconciliation; to stay in relationship and stand in solidarity with brothers and sisters who are suffering.

How will we shepherd differently after gathering together in this place?Â

How will we ensure we are in relationship and constantly being transformed into the likeness of our Good/Chief Shepherd?

How will we hold onto the encounter with one another and with God in this place?

Because without relationship, without encounter, issues arise. To resist the lions, all that threatens our flocks, we must remain in community.

This isn't a one-off thing. Like so much of Peter's ethics, it is living and continuous, on-going, and transformative.

Peter also returns to the promise of the glory of Christ, who already has victory over the demonic, a cosmic victory over the lion, by his cross and resurrection.Â

The shepherds are part of that resurrection victory.

The call of the Christian, and the promise to the Christian, is to share both the suffering and the resurrection and glory of Christ.

This is good news.

The temporary nature of suffering is seen in the light of God's everlasting, eternal promise of salvation.Â

At the end of the letter, the promise of what salvation entails is specific: called to "eternal glory in Christ", God will "restore, support, strengthen and establish you" (5.10).Â

This is the God who takes on our anxieties, this is the God in whom Peter's followers must trust, and this is the God to whom "be power for ever and ever" (5.11).Â

Whatever suffering is endured for Christ, God's promises revealed in Christ are eternal, assured, and wonderful beyond all hope.

The power and promises of God will have the final word.

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Through prayer, Bible study, fellowship and discussion, the conference community will explore what it means for the Anglican Communion to be responsive to the needs of our 21st Century world. Read 1 Peter and find out more about the theme and biblical focus [here](#).

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