

THE LOVE SHOVE

Easter 4: Scattered and Gathered

John 10:1-10; Psalm 23

Jesus as the Good Shepherd is an image that never gets old.

Without a doubt,

Psalm 23 is the most frequently read psalm in public worship,
but I've never heard anyone complain.

I don't think *anyone* in this room would say
you're sick and tired of hearing Psalm 23
and you wish everyone would just give it a rest.

Yes, there are moments, or seasons, in our lives,
when we might feel removed from God's loving care,
when it might be hard to connect with, or even *believe*, this image.

But there is no one who is repulsed by it.

We are all drawn inexorably toward this image of Jesus as a
comforting,
protecting,
soothing,
guiding, and
loving shepherd.

Especially in times of loss, of distress, of chaos, of danger.

So today, as *every* year, on the fourth Sunday of Easter,
we worship God as Shepherd.

But . . . what is it, exactly, that *makes* Jesus the Shepherd
a *Good* Shepherd?

What does Jesus *do* as a shepherd, that makes us say, "Oh, *yes!*
Jesus is a *Good* shepherd."

Is Jesus a good shepherd,

because he always protects us from every danger,
so that nothing bad happens to us . . . ?

is it that he always fights off the wolf,
always foils the plan of the thief,
and makes them run away in defeat . . . ?

is it that Jesus always cradles us gently, and speaks softly,
always comforts, never frightens,

that we might always live in peace. . . ?

If *that's* the case, it makes you wonder if our Good Shepherd
is doing a very good job.

That ever-comforting, ever-protecting image of the Good Shepherd
is, by *far*, the dominant one.

That's the one that gets put into paintings and poetry
and greeting cards and refrigerator magnets.

That's the one that comes immediately to mind,
whenever we hear Psalm 23 and John 10.

And there's nothing *wrong* with that image.

Psalm 23 *is*, in fact, an ode to the shepherding God
who makes us lie down in green pastures in peace,
who leads us beside still waters.

It's not an . . . *inaccurate* image.

It's just not *complete*.

Even the 23rd Psalm openly states that we will *also* find ourselves
in the valley of the shadow of death,
or surrounded by enemies.

Life does not cease to be challenging or dangerous
just because the shepherd is there.

So what makes Jesus a Good Shepherd?

Let's look at our Gospel reading, John 10:1-10.

Here Jesus gives us a picture of sheep, inside a sheepfold,
a protective shelter for the night.

The true shepherd of the sheep enters by the gate,
calls his sheep by name, and they respond.

In contrast, there are imposters—thieves and bandits, Jesus says—
who *don't* use the gate, but try to climb in another way.

But when the good shepherd comes to the fold,
the gatekeeper lets him in,
he calls the sheep, and brings them out for the day,
and then he leads them where he wants them to go.

The people hearing this little parable didn't quite *understand* Jesus.
So Jesus spelled it out for them, saying,

“I am the gate for the sheep.”

I’m not sure whether that explanation

cleared things up, or made it more confusing.

Because Jesus is mixing his metaphors at will.

At one point, he’s the shepherd; at another, he’s the gate.

But that’s the way it is. One image can’t say it all.

Jesus uses many different images to describe himself.

As the gate, Jesus is making a bold claim.

I am the entry point.

I am the passageway to life—*abundant* life.

Abundant, not as in having lots of goodies and comfort,

but having a quality of life, a full-ness,

a life that overflows in goodness.

There are those who think they know the way into the Kingdom—

whether by violence and political rebellion,

or by an obsession with religious ritual purity.

But they are false shepherds. Hired hands, it says later in the chapter.

They *misunderstand* God’s Kingdom.

But Jesus the Gate and the Good Shepherd says,

come in through me,

attach yourself to me,

I will lead you there.

Life is found as we pass through the gate,

coming in *and* going out.

As much as we might like the safety of the sheepfold,

abundant life consists of coming in and going out of the gate.

So as I studied this image of the shepherd and the sheep,

of the sheepfold, and the gate,

I learned something interesting,

that I don’t think was ever pointed out to me before.

Let’s just review the image here again,

if you want to open your Bibles to John 10.

There is the sheepfold in v. 1.

Maybe a stone-walled enclosure, with thorny briars on top.

The sheep have been there all night, and it’s now morning.

The shepherd has arrived to reclaim his sheep, v. 2,

and take them back outside,

into the wide open countryside . . . where the wild animals live.

The gatekeeper opens the gate, v. 3,

and the shepherd calls the sheep

and he gets them out of the fold.

Now, I always pictured this—and it kind of *reads* that way—

as if the shepherd simply gives a little whistle or something,

and walks out the doorway and all the sheep gladly follow him out.

Could be the way it happens,

except for the verb Jesus chose to describe “bringing them out.”

In v. 4, it says,

“*When* he has *brought out* all his own,

he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him.”

After they are brought out in the open, *then* he gets in front of them,

and leads them to pasture.

And by “brought out,” he means “shoved out.”

The verb Jesus uses here is “*ekballo*.”

It’s used all through the New Testament,

but *never* in the sense of gently walking in front

and saying, [*whistle*] “here we go, come along now.”

No. It’s the same verb used when it says

Jesus “*cast out*” an evil spirit.

It’s the same verb used when it says Jesus took a whip

and “*drove* the money-changers out of the temple.”

It’s the same verb used when it says the Holy Spirit

drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by the devil.

Virtually *everywhere* that verb is used in the New Testament,

it implies pushing someone somewhere they don’t want to go.

I find that interesting. And *significant*.

The sheep—that’s *us*—would no doubt *prefer*

staying in the safety and security of the sheepfold.

But staying in the sheepfold is not where abundant life is found.
Abundant life is found in coming in and going out of the gate . . .
coming in and going out and coming in and going out . . .

So out of love for us sheep,
out of a strong and fierce love for us,
Jesus shoves us out of the sheepfold.
You've heard of a love-pat. This is a love-*shove*.
Jesus shoves us out from where we feel safe and secure,
and into a broken and dangerous world
that desperately needs what God's kingdom has to offer.
A world that needs the healing and reconciling
and peace-building and justice-seeking of kingdom people.

And *we need it, too!*
If we are to "have life, and have it abundantly," to use Jesus' words,
we need to live into our created purpose.
We were *not* created to live our lives behind stone walls all the time.
We were created for an active, dynamic life in the wide open world.

The church gathered, as we are this morning,
is a wonderful thing.
It is a life-giving thing.
Every bit as much as restful nights in the sheepfold
are necessary for healthy sheep.
It's an essential part of the rhythm of life.
But we were not created just to hang around other sheep 24/7.

A healthy church, and healthy believers that make up that church,
are engaged in God's saving and healing and redeeming
mission in the world.
Yes, our vision at Park View is to be a community of communities,
but that's only the first part of the phrase.
It's incomplete without the second part.
We are a community of communities *engaged in God's mission*.

Jesus our good shepherd, out of his great love for us,
regularly shoves us out of the sheepfold
into a world of need, and danger, and opportunity.

So Jesus is *not* the good shepherd
because he always protects us from every danger,
or because he never lets bad things happen to us.
Jesus is *not* the good shepherd
because he fights off every wolf,
and foils the plan of every thief.
Jesus is *not* the good shepherd
because he always speaks comfort and gentleness.

Yes, when we *need* that kind of comfort, for our health and well-being,
Jesus will be there in that way.

But Jesus is our good shepherd,
because Jesus knows what we need for life.
So like a *good* shepherd,
he gives us a love-shove out of the fold and into the world.
Where we are *not* promised freedom from pain and suffering.
But we are promised presence.
Jesus said, "I will never leave or forsake you."
Even out in the wild wide world,
even in suffering, the shepherd is with us.
Sometimes saving us *from* the attack,
sometimes suffering *with* us in the attack.
But *never* abandoning us.

For the most part,
the lives of the faithful sheep of Christ in America,
are not fraught with lots of danger.
The same thing *can't* be said for many places in our world.

We heard a brief word last Sunday, shared in our prayer time,
from a brother from Nigeria,
a Baptist pastor by the name of Ayuba Ashafa. [invite him up]
He is from Kaduna, the epicenter of bloody clashes
between Christian and Muslim communities in Northern Nigeria.
He is the founder and director of Justice and Peace Makers,
a movement of Christians and Muslims seeking to build bridges
and hammer out inter-religious reconciliation.

He is here for several weeks at the Summer Peacebuilding Institute
at EMU to be equipped for his work

His 2,000-member congregation
has been burned on four different occasions,
most recently a few weeks ago.

When he left his wife and three adult children at home
a little over a week ago, to fly here,
his area was under a 24-hour curfew,
and he needed to pay for a police escort to the airport.

That's *not* the kind of world we are accustomed to living in,
when we're outside the sheepfold.

So I asked him to share a testimony with us this morning.
A story that tells how he, or his family, or his church,
experiences Jesus as shepherd,
in the midst of such suffering and distress.

[story from Rev. Ashafa]

—*Phil Kniss, May 15, 2011*