

E4B 2024 Good Shepherd John 10:11-18

My second year in seminary one of our professors began a class by showing different images of Jesus and asking us what each slide made us think about God. After seeing classical paintings from European masters, modern, abstract, and provocative interpretations, and depictions from various cultures around the world, one image, a typical Good Shepherd Jesus like you'd find in many churches with predominantly white congregations, was deemed too sentimental and unrealistic: *Jesus looks like he belongs in a Pantene shampoo commercial. How many middle-easterners do you know with blonde hair and blue eyes? A real shepherd wouldn't hike around in a choir robe. Is a Fabio-look-alike-Jesus cradling a calm, clean, white lamb really the best representation of God?* Valid criticism, since Western Christianity isn't done wrestling its demons of racism, paternalism, and colonialism. But I admitted to the class that my *first* thought when I saw that picture was of myself holding my cat Osgar who I'd adopted as a kitten the previous winter. In the few months I'd had him, that \$20 shelter cat had required a \$500 surgery to remove a piece of foam he'd eaten that had gotten stuck. He'd redecorated by knocking a bunch of vases off the top of the kitchen cabinets. He slept on my pillow instead of his cat bed and would't touch the three level cat tree I bought him when I felt guilty for getting him neutered. But I love him. I think about the times I've been destructive, when I've not appreciated the gifts I've received, when I've acted against my own best interests. If I can provide for, love and hold Osgar, how much more does our shepherding God provide for, love and hold me?

Jesus didn't invent the shepherd metaphor; it was common for kings throughout the Ancient Near East to style themselves as shepherds, benevolently protecting and providing for their subjects as if caring for sheep. The Old Testament writers take the comparison so literally that they tell us David was in the field tending the sheep when Samuel arrived to anoint him king of Israel; David, the Shepherd-King, remains the exemplary ruler in Israel's memory and imagination. The twenty-third psalm that begins *the Lord is my shepherd...* is notated as a psalm of David—meaning either David composed it himself or his leadership inspired the psalmist to write it with him in mind. The prophet Nathan even uses a hypothetical story about a stolen lamb to rebuke David when he abuses his power. It's when David stops ruling with the care and diligence of a shepherd that his family and his nation suffer.

When Jesus calls himself a shepherd, he takes his place in the line of Davidic kings which Israel had long hoped would be restored. But by calling himself the *good* shepherd, he claims an authority that is uncorrupted by the temptations of power that too many leaders find irresistible. Whereas kings are prone to exploit their subjects for their own benefit, Jesus cast a vision of selfless service consistent throughout his teaching and ministry, his whole life and

death. When the wolf threatens, the hired hand saves himself; but the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. This is not to say that the whole reason for the incarnation was for Jesus to die; shepherds don't get into the business *hoping* that they and their flock will get attacked by wolves. But when others would have run from the wolves and left the sheep to fend for themselves, Jesus chose *not* to save himself at the expense of others, even when the consequence of his selfless service was the injustice of the cross. Ancient kings portrayed themselves as shepherds when they too often acted like wolves; more recent rulers abandoned the shepherd metaphor entirely in favor of more militant images. But Jesus shows us that a king ruling as God intends looks less like a general riding a war horse (or an armored tank) and more like a shepherd holding a lamb (or a 22 pound tabby cat that still thinks he's a kitten).

In case you didn't know, I adopted a second cat. After about the third trip to the vet for Osgar eating plastic bags, flip-flops, a wristwatch, the vet suggested getting him another cat to keep him entertained. And many of you have met my dog; it is something of a zoo at my house. Likewise Jesus expands the shepherd metaphor beyond caring for just one lamb to the whole flock. Psalm 23 with its first-person language sounds very personal, almost private—*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures, he restores my soul*—yet Jesus tells us that he is the good shepherd of the sheep—plural. Jesus even includes sheep from other pastures—those that don't belong to this fold but are part of one flock under one shepherd. When we feel alone, it's reassuring to think of the shepherd of the twenty-third psalm caring for us individually. But Jesus extending the shepherd's care to all sheep, saying the flock isn't really whole until it includes those from other folds we don't know, means we are challenged to practice the radical inclusivity of Jesus who not only welcomed all sorts of people but graciously accepted the hospitality of all sorts of people as well.

On this fourth Sunday of Easter each year we read in turn parts of John's extended and mixed metaphor of the Good Shepherd. But what I really enjoy today is that we get to hear about Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, and the twenty third psalm when it's not somebody's funeral. Jesus shows us the leadership of a shepherd who is good when earthly rulers tend not to be; and Jesus shows us that the Good Shepherd loves and cares, provides and protects not just us but the whole flock. But Jesus' invitation to listen to his voice and his assurance that he will remain with us even when the wolves are circling, reminds us that we don't have to wait until our loved ones are reciting Psalm 23 over our ashes to know and to trust the abundance of God's love. We're singing four versions of that psalm today, so we don't forget what God promises to do for us in this life we're living now. Trusting that the Good Shepherd is faithful to us, we can boldly claim: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*