

My friend Lisa and I spent a few hours of our vacation at the British Museum looking at really old stuff from all over the world, from ancient Egypt to Greece to Japan. We noticed that regardless of time and place, every civilization portrayed the same basic themes in their art. It was a humbling reminder that our Western Christian culture is relatively recent and newfangled by comparison, and that we're more connected to all of those other societies than we sometimes like to think. Noah's ark isn't the only ancient story of a catastrophic flood, nor is it even the oldest. Although Psalm 23 is traditionally thought to have been written either by or about King David, he's not the first political figure to use the metaphor of a shepherd to compare ruling a kingdom to protecting and defending a flock of sheep. So by the time Jesus claims to reign over the kingdom of God like a benevolent shepherd, the image is well-known.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd may be the most beloved and enduring metaphor in our Christian tradition. Churches are named *Good Shepherd*; the lectionary appoints this fourth Sunday of Easter as Good Shepherd Sunday every year; and we'd be hard-pressed to find someone who hasn't seen a stained glass window or painting of Jesus holding a lamb—which I suppose is much easier to paint than Jesus, the light of the world, or the bread of life, or the way, the truth, and the life, or—as we read today—the gate for the sheep. But whereas plenty of people in the Ancient Near East made a living as shepherds, it's not a very popular job in our culture today. I certainly don't understand this scripture better because of all my experience herding sheep; quite the opposite, I'd have to say that the very little I know about sheep comes from studying the shepherding passages in scripture. Yet the metaphor persists.

Besides fewer and fewer people taking up shepherding as a career, one of the reasons I'm surprised this image still retains so much power is that it flies in the face of the rugged individualism that our society prizes. We only have to think back two or three years, to the height of the covid crisis, which like so many things instantly turned partisan and divisive. In the midst of that danger, chaos, and fear, as people chose to comply with safety restrictions or not and chose to follow medical advice or not, it became quite common to hear people insult those with whom they disagreed by calling them “sheep”—the implication being that people were too eager to trust what they were told and were foolish to go along with the herd. To be clear, it is idolatry to equate our political leaders with Jesus, but it's still very odd to hear Christians insult mostly other Christians by using “sheep” as a derogatory term—we who are supposed to be following the one who called himself a shepherd.

At some point between the ancient world and now, we stopped appreciating the idea that we are cared for like sheep protected by a shepherd. Oh, we read Psalm 23 at funerals, but what we

envision for life after death is much different than what we expect now. We don't want someone making us lie down in green pastures or leading us beside still waters: we don't want anyone *making* us do anything, and we'd like to think that we provide for all our needs ourselves. We want to deal with enemies by attacking, defeating, and punishing them; we don't want to have to sit down at a table in the presence of our enemies—and we especially don't want a [communion] table prepared for us in the presence of our enemies. How thoughtless, that Jesus even didn't ask us what kind of king we wanted him to be before he chose to lead, provide, and comfort like a shepherd.

Still, Jesus using the shepherd figure of speech is the easy part of this passage. When the disciples don't understand him, he mixes the metaphor, calling himself not just the shepherd but also the gate for the sheep. Sometimes pastors are referred to as shepherds, but we, too are supposed to be sheep; at most we are deputized by the good shepherd—like sheep dogs. But if it's important for us to remember that we're not the shepherd, it's even more important for us, for all of us, to remember that we're not the gate for the sheep either. Because our human nature wants to use a gate to keep people out, whereas Jesus is the gate that welcomes people in.

If we think back to the other passages from John that we read before Easter, we see Jesus, the good shepherd, the open gate, not isolating the flock but adding to it: the man born blind, who Jesus finds when he had been left out of the fold, restores to the flock, and then seeks out again when others still refused to let him in. The woman at the well, who Jesus invites with living water, even though her religion, ethnicity, and marital status had kept her on the outside. He even calls Lazarus back when he has passed through the shadow of death. If we were to fast forward to the end of the book, to Revelation, we read about the heavenly city of Jerusalem where the gates are never shut by day and there is no night. Jesus spends his life ushering the kingdom of heaven into this world, acting as the shepherd *and* the gate—and therefore being open to welcome people in, not closed to keep people out.

Since this is Camp Sunday, I feel I should mention that this is something Camp does well—figuratively *and* literally: there is only one road into Sequanota, passing under the iconic gate that bears its name. Once when the road was re-paved, the macadam at the entrance was laid so thick that the gate physically couldn't swing shut. Although that problem has since been fixed and the gate is, technically, functional, I still can't remember when I've seen it closed, which itself is a good metaphor for how camp and all our Christian communities should be—open, welcoming gatherings where we seek to follow the voice of the good shepherd. May we give thanks to the one who has made us his sheep; may we discern the voice of the shepherd who guides us to abundant life; and may we never try to close to others the gates that God stopped at nothing to open.