

I am the Good Shepherd John 10:11-18

A while ago, I attended a worship service where a distinguished bishop was to preach. He had a fine preaching reputation, but in the experience I learned that many things distract from hearing the Word preached. I am ashamed to admit it, but on that particular day, I focused on the wrong thing. The bishop processed into the church's sanctuary and carried a crosier—a staff that represents a bishop's pastoral functions.

Throughout worship I could not shake the question: if the bishop was a shepherd then what was I?

Surely we love the twenty-third Psalm and the shepherding imagery. We also recognize the power of the Bible's shepherding image in an agrarian culture. The pastoral picture of the Good Shepherd is a valid one, no doubt. Still, being likened to sheep is not exactly flattering. Do we embrace the sheep comparison? No! Yet if we understand Jesus as the good shepherd, then we also realize that we are like sheep. No doubt we have mixed feelings about the "*I am the Good Shepherd*" analogy despite its value as a biblical image.

Today's lesson from St. John's Gospel is one of many texts that use this striking shepherd/sheep image. Perhaps few of us ever see or spend quality time with sheep. Yet today, as in biblical times, food and other products from sheep are among the chief sources of human survival.

Our Bible relates many stories about sheep and shepherds. The Exodus narrative hinges on the story of Passover—Jews slaughtering a lamb to give the angel of death a sign to *pass over* their houses. I do not suppose that any well-versed Jewish person could imagine hearing *Passover* and not picture an unblemished lamb.

Many pastors' stoles display an emblem of the Lamb of God. Biblical writers employ this symbol to the end of Scripture where Revelation depicts the lamb as a sign of apocalyptic fulfillment.

The psalms include a multitude of allusions to sheep and shepherds: sheep being scattered or led to slaughter (for example, Psalm 44:11). Scripture employs the imagery in Numbers, Samuel, Chronicles, the Major Prophets, as well as many New Testament passages. For example, Nathan's disapproving parable concerning the degenerate "Bathsheba affair" begins innocently enough:

Nathan said to David, “*There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him.*” (2 Samuel 12:1-3)

Still, no matter how much the Bible refers to them, sheep are smelly, stupid, and slothful. Above all, they are utterly helpless creatures. My most vivid memory of sheep was on a lazy, hot summer Texas afternoon. I was driving from Corpus Christi to San Antonio and spotted a vast holding pen of thousands of sheep.

There they all stood in the hot sun, like the proverbial lambs led to slaughter. These sheep were absolutely helpless. Standing and waiting to die, with no realization whatsoever of what awaited them. Are people really like this?

And if this were not enough, in biblical times the shepherding vocation was not high on any self-respecting social climber’s agenda. Shepherding relegated persons to the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy. Many non-land-owning peasants raised sheep to survive.

This fact was, I suppose, the great scandal in the birth narrative of St. Luke. The angel announces Jesus’ birth to a bunch of grimy hillside shepherds outside suburban Bethlehem. What is even more astounding is that Jesus would call himself the “good shepherd” (St. John 10:11, 14). To the first listeners in Jesus’ day, this was a flagrant contradiction in terms—a first rate oxymoron.

Why is it we bristle so when we consider the analogy of people to sheep? Do we resent God—or anybody—identifying us as smelly, lazy, stupid, and oblivious? I imagine we do.

In our most honest moments, we may admit we resent the implications of this analogy because it is so true. Sheep separate themselves from a flock, not by some nefarious plan to escape, but simply by keeping their heads down and grazing from grass clump to grass clump. They graze for hours at a time without regard to anything except the grass beneath them. Suddenly, looking up, they realize there are no other sheep around them. They have literally eaten their way into a state of “lostness.” I do not know if they panic, but I suspect they are anxious.

Perhaps we are like this. Most people, left to their own devices do not want to “*have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep . . . [following] the devices and desires of our own hearts*” (Church of England, *The Book of Common Prayer* [Oxford: University Press, 1868], 49).

And yet we do. Most of us are neither good nor bad. We simply forget what is in our self-interest. We all need what Scripture calls “shepherding.” It takes a great deal of courage, ego strength, and self-knowledge to face the truth of our need.

The good news is this: although the scriptural analogy may be unflattering, we are all in need of a shepherd. Accordingly, God provides Jesus for us—the Good Shepherd. In the words of Hebrews 12:2, God has provided for us a “*pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*” Jesus comes to us as a good shepherd to bind up our wounds, protect us, and lead us to green pastures and still waters. This Good Shepherd restores our souls. This is one biblical image we simply cannot do without. Alleluia. Amen.