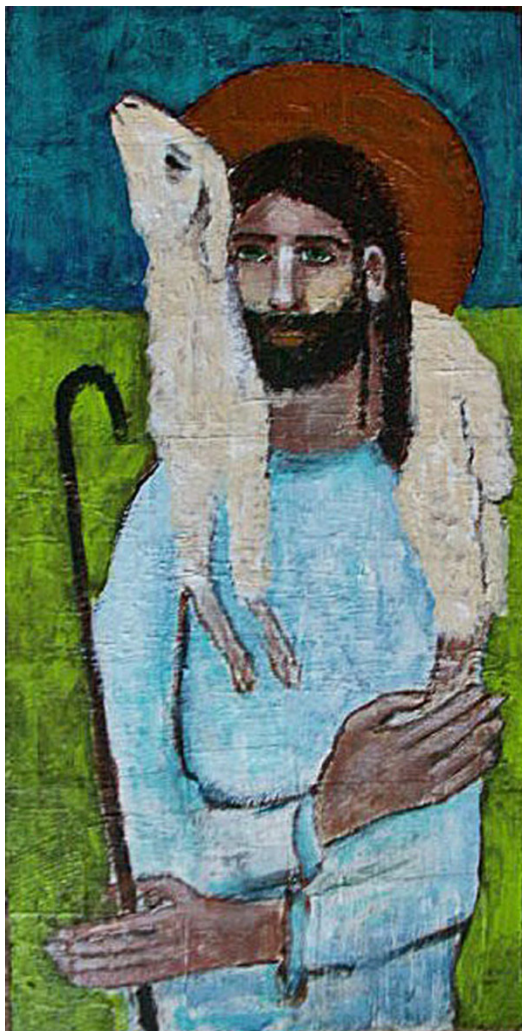


The Voice of the Shepherd

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"The Good Shepherd" by Danielle Wilkerson

Prayer of Illumination

Draw us close, Holy Spirit, as the Scriptures are read
and the Word is proclaimed. Let the word of faith be
on our lips and in our hearts, and let all other words slip away.
May there be one voice we hear today—
the voice of truth and grace. Amen.

Let us hear now the Good Shepherd's words to us, his sheep.

Scripture: John 10:1-10 (NRSVue)
Gospel Reading

¹ "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷ So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – "The Voice of the Shepherd"

There is a story in the Jewish tradition about why God chose Moses to lead his people.

Moses was feeding his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness. He noticed a young sheep wandering away from the flock, so he followed it all the way to a ravine where the sheep had found a well to drink from. When Moses got up to the sheep he said, "*I didn't know that you ran away because you were thirsty. Now you must be weary.*"

Moses then took the lamb on his shoulders and carried it back. Then God said, "Because you've shown pity in leading back one of a flock belonging to a man, you shall lead my flock Israel."

This is the heart of the shepherd. This shepherd imagery is rich throughout the Scriptures.

From **Psalms 23** we hear,

"The Lord is my Shepherd.
He makes me lie down in Green pastures.
He leads me beside still Waters.
He restores My soul.
He leads me in the paths of Righteousness.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for thou art With me.
Thy rod and thy staff they Comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine Enemies.
Thou anointest my head with Oil; my cup Runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for Forever."

Ezekiel 34 also gives a wonderful picture of what a true shepherd does:

- The true shepherd seeks out lost sheep.
- Protects the flock from becoming wolf-bait.
- Heals the sick, binds up the broken, gathers what's been driven away.
- The true shepherd leads not with force or cruelty.
- Jesus, a few verses later, will call himself the Good Shepherd.
- Jesus left the 99 for the one lost sheep.
- Jesus sought out the man born blind whom he healed when he was cast out of his community of faith.
- After his resurrection, Jesus told Peter three times "feed my sheep."



Jesus warns us of those who are not true shepherds—those who are wolves in shepherd's clothing. The true motive of these "thieves, robbers, and strangers" is to "steal, kill, and destroy." They are anti-shepherds. They aren't there to feed the sheep. They're there to feed themselves—to feed on the sheep and prey upon them. They come into these positions not through the door, but another way. Just as we should have suspicions of someone entering a house by the window rather than the door, we need to be judicious toward those who would abuse their authority, cut corners, and do things their own way—a very different way than Jesus who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

...



We also have the sheep in Jesus' parable we heard. That's us. Sheep are God's creatures, but like them, we're not always the sharpest knife in the drawer.

- Sheep are needy. If you see a sheep on its back, it needs help—sheep can't get up from that position. It's called a downcast sheep. If left on its back too long, the sheep will eventually die.
- Sheep can be timid and fickle—they fear moving water. They prefer to drink from "still waters" before they will drink.
- Each sheep has its own "Flight Zone", the distance the sheep feels it needs to get away from danger. They generally won't let anything (*even each other*) come within their flight zone.

We too have our fears, like our space, and have comfort zones we like to be in. But the Shepherd coaxes us into new places, life giving places.

- Sheep have a herding instinct that overrides their intelligence. If one sheep goes over a cliff, the whole herd will go over the cliff as well. If the lead sheep is given a pot of food and doesn't eat from it, all the other sheep will pass it by, too.
- Sheep need a shepherd.

Peter reminds us, "For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls." (1 Peter 2:25)

Being in tune with our "sheepness" reminds us how much we need the Good Shepherd, that we can't make it without Christ. The Shepherd does for the sheep what the sheep can't do for themselves. The Shepherd trains us to be good sheep. And he also teaches us to shepherd others.



The word “pastor” in Latin is *shepherd*. God in Christ pastors us, shepherds us, guides, prods, lifts us upon his shoulders, leads us forward. Christ prays for us.

- Shepherds were and are not wimps. They’re kind of like Chuck Norris: a little weathered by the elements—tough, sleepless, never off duty.
- Shepherds are alert, always planning, looking ahead, making provision, and looking out after each of their scattered sheep. They lived with the flock and were always in front of them. In the evening, the shepherd would bring them back home, safe from predators.
- Shepherds aren’t afraid to get their hands dirty. They are tough, but never tyrants with their sheep.
- A shepherd’s sling was used to shoot stones at wolves or animals of prey. But also the shepherd would use his sling to bring sheep back. If calling didn’t work, he would fling a stone from his sling right in front of the sheep to get them back.
- The Shepherd’s Staff was a wooden club with a lump of wood at the end that was studded with nails. In moments of threat, it’s the shepherd who places himself between the dependent sheep and the aggressive enemy. They laid their life down for the sheep.
- The Shepherd’s Rod was used to catch and pull back sheep when they were stuck or in danger. At the end of the day, when the sheep went back into the pen, they would have to pass under the Shepherd’s Rod as he counted them. As each sheep passed under, the shepherd would examine it to make sure it didn’t get any injuries that day.

Like the sheep, the Church trusts the One to whom it belongs, and finds itself under Christ’s protection and care. Our task is to become familiar with and trust in the Shepherd’s voice. To recognize and trust his voice over all others—even our own. This is a call for discernment for us.

- Know the voice of the Shepherd. Trust it.

The Palestinian Shepherd had a special relationship with his sheep. The sheep were kept more for their wool than for their meat. So they were in relationship together for the long-haul. It’s a free relationship. The sheep go in and out.

There's a famous story about Sir George Adam Smith traveling in the Middle East with a guide. They came across a shepherd and his sheep. The shepherd showed them the fold where the sheep were kept at night. It had four walls and only one way in. The traveler asked where the door to the opening was. The shepherd answered,

"I am the door."

What do you mean that you're the door?

"When the light has gone and all the sheep are inside, I lie in that open space. No sheep gets out without crossing over my body. No wolf comes in unless he crosses my body. I am the door."

Jesus is the doorway to the abundant life, the God-life. Jesus is saying that the Holy One is to us a doorway of divinity, an entryway into to the abundant life and green pastures. Jesus can be a CLOSED DOOR to protect the sheep from those that seek their harm. Jesus can also be an OPEN DOOR, giving us that freedom to go in for protection and go out to find pasture. We gather together here, and we're then sent out to the mission field.

Palestinian shepherds had names for each of the sheep—like our pets that we love and care for today: Black Leg, Brown Ear, Long Ears, or White Nose. In other words, they had a relationship with their sheep, a tender relationship, like Christ has with us, and we with him. Not only collectively as a flock, but individually with us as sheep.

There's a recent true story about how the sheep listen to their shepherd. A widow and her son had their own flock of sheep. And they were mixed in with another person's flock. To get them back, the widow asked her son to bring the sheep together and follow them. The young boy pulled out a recorder and played a simple tune. All of their sheep came out from the others and followed him. They knew the song of the shepherd.

It's crucial for us to sharpen our Good Shepherd voice recognition. There are a lot of voices out there telling us which way to go. Christ is our door into pasture and fullness of life. Stepping out in faith and walking through Christ, the door leads us to a deeper and more focused understanding of ourselves and what God is calling us to do. Crossing the threshold of Christ is the doorway to growth and change. To be more fully who you really are. To no longer live in the past or be defined by coulds and shoulds and oughts. To walk away from a life of regret, peril, and fear.

Our passage ends with one of Jesus' most beautiful statements:

"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."

This is the heart of the shepherd. To follow Jesus is not, as some seem to fear, to live a half-life, a life filled with "shall nots." To follow the good shepherd is to live life, our human life, to the greatest possible fullness. It's not an easy life, but it is joyful. With Christ, we don't have a half-empty cup. We don't even have a half-full cup. We have a cup that runs over.

Jesus was all about abundance, rather than scarcity. Miracles of abundance—water into wine and multiplication of the loaves and fish, with leftovers. The miraculous catch of fish.

Christ not only is the gate, but he opens up to us a new and living way. We can go in and go out without fear—peace. He gives us the **Psalm 23** kind of life. But he also wants to train us sheep in the ways of shepherding. We're also called to shepherd one another. We're not saviors, but we are shepherds. There are many ways we can shepherd:

- as parents, grandparents, caregivers, Sunday school teachers, aunts, uncles, elders, deacons, ministers, mentors, nurses, school teachers. We are shepherds of the sheep entrusted to us.

Jesus reminds us that only those who go through the gate, the Jesus-gate, can shepherd the flock in the footsteps and character of the Good Shepherd.

Let us pray:

*Jesus, you are not only The Shepherd and The Door, but you are The Guardian of the Threshold. Protect and support me in the unlit hallways of life and in the waiting. Your love and presence are stronger than my fear. Thank you for delivering me from evil. Your hope is greater than my doubt. Jesus, thank you for all the possibilities and abundant life you open up for us. Give us the courage to hear your voice and follow your lead.
Amen.*

May Christ, that great Shepherd of the sheep, the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls, the one who has opened up for you the gate of glory, give you life in all its fullness and lead you to life eternal. May the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bless you now and always.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "The Good Shepherd" by Danielle Wilkerson

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