

# The Good Shepherd

sermon digest

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John 10:1-10, 14-16

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If I were to ask you to identify your favorite childhood image of Jesus, what would it be? I suspect many of us would recall a picture depicting Jesus as the Good Shepherd. I recall encountering pictures of Jesus carrying a lamb many times in the church of my childhood and also having one in my room at home. The gentleness and tender care exemplified in the pictures have served as comforting images through the ages.

Jesus as a shepherd was the most common way of depicting Jesus in the first four centuries of the church's life. Jesus carrying a lamb over his shoulder is preserved in a fresco over the baptismal font of the earliest known house church, and he is frequently depicted as the Good Shepherd in the catacombs where Christians were buried. Shepherd imagery is prominent in worship spaces and in final resting places, "as if to say," Kimberly Bracken Long suggests, "this shepherd Jesus guides and protects and provides throughout all of life, at the beginning of life's journey and at the end" ["The Shepherd Jesus," *Journal for Preachers, Easter 2006*]. More than a sweet picture we outgrow in adulthood, the image of the Good Shepherd informs, comforts and commissions us our whole life long.

**The Good Shepherd is an image intended to inspire the faith of adults in difficult times.** Lest we make the picture too sweet, too withdrawn from the challenges of life, we should remind ourselves of the particular circumstances under which the writer of John's Gospel first drew Jesus as a loving shepherd. According to John, Jesus has just finished healing the man born blind. You will remember that rather than the moment becoming one of great joy, it became an occasion engendering doubt and consternation. The joy of the moment is lost as the healed man becomes the center of controversy. He is forced to answer a multitude of questions as people, including his own parents, seek to appropriately distance themselves from him lest they, too, get caught up in the blame game swirling around him. Jesus, hearing that the man has been cast out of the synagogue, seeks him out and invites him to faith. The man, in turn, believes and worships. Not missing a beat, John moves into a reflection on Jesus as the gateway for his sheep and Jesus' comforting reassurance "I know my own and my own know me."

Written by John to early Christians who like the man born blind were finding themselves the objects of suspicion and exclusion in their previous communities of faith, John's image of the Good Shepherd provides a word of solace to Christians enduring all sorts of afflictions, but particularly to those who suffer affliction because of their faithfulness to the one who has given them light and hope. The words, the imagery is not new. John reaches back into the recesses of history, recalling a time in which Israel's prophets castigated Israel's kings for abuse of their own people. Thundering in a manner not unlike prophets of our own day, Ezekiel raged:

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?  
(34:18-19)

The kings faced God's judgment, but the people God's hope:

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice (34:15-16).

Do you hear the close similarity in the words John places on the lips of Jesus? Cut off from his community of faith, the man born blind was welcomed into Jesus' fold; and followers of Jesus in John's own day, who were being scattered by the opposition growing up around them, would be gathered into the safe and loving precincts of Christ's own fold.

**The Good Shepherd and the sheepfold to which it beckons call us into fellowship and mission.** Interestingly, the church seemed to outgrow its renditions of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Despite their flourishing in the early centuries, in the first half of the fifth century Good Shepherd images virtually disappear from Christian art. Why was that the case? Could it have been that the church, empowered in 380 by its establishment as the religion of Rome, no longer felt vulnerable and in need of a place of safety? In the place of images of a lowly shepherd, images of Jesus as teacher and king flourished. Depictions of pomp and royalty replaced the shepherd's simple tunic. As a matter of fact, an early fifth-century pastoral mosaic in a mausoleum in Ravenna, the last of its kind, revolutionized the

traditional garb of the lowly shepherd, replacing it with a gold tunic, sewn with blue bands and featuring the purple mantle of royalty. “Christ has become a royal or imperial personage: he is the king of his sheep, rather than their shepherd,” Boniface Ramsey observes [*Harvard Theological Review*, 1983, p. 376].

No longer, Ramsey goes on to say, does the church see itself in a defensive position with respect to the world. By the fifth century, “the world” and the church have become in some sense “virtually identical.” No longer needing the image of a “shepherd who, in heroic fashion, fends off the lions and bears that threaten to destroy the flock,” the church exchanges the image of the gentle guide represented by the Good Shepherd for images denoting power and authority [377].

Is this indeed the life to which the church is called? Or has the church’s enrichment of its coffers and acquisition of worldly power threatened its identity and robbed it of true power? A popular story is often told about the great thirteenth century theologian Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas visits Pope Innocent II, who proudly waves his hand in the direction of a large pile of church receipts and their palatial surroundings and boasts, “You see, Thomas, the church can no longer say, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’” Aquinas reportedly replied, “True, holy father, but neither can she now say, ‘Rise and walk.’” Whether the story is fiction or an actual occurrence, it poses a challenge to the church of any and every age, lest the church’s enjoyment of prestige, power and wealth isolate it from the world in which it moves.

Lutheran pastor Peter Marty recalls a story from St. Anthony’s Catholic Church in San Francisco. For years the church has served meals to people in need. Over the doorway into its dining room are the words “Caritate Dei.” One day a young mechanic just released from jail entered the door and sat down for a meal. He turned to the woman cleaning off an adjoining table, asking, “When do we get on our knees and do the chores, lady?” She responded, “You don’t.” “Then when’s the sermon coming?” “Aren’t any,” she said. “How ‘bout that lecture on life, huh?” “Not here,” she responded. The man was suspicious. “Then what’s the gimmick?” The woman pointed to the words over the door. He squinted at them and asked, “What’s it mean?” “Out of love for God,” she said with a smile and moved on to another table [*Christian Century*, April 17, 1996].

“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” John’s words, always in the plural, are addressed to the flock gathered around Jesus. More than a childhood image, the Good Shepherd to whom he points is the one who calls us to one another and to the world that he loves our whole life long. Because his is not a door of privilege, a door that opens only to the select few, neither is ours. It is rather a door of welcome in keeping with the welcome with which we ourselves have been met.

Recalling her days as a chaplain intern at a federal psychiatric facility caring largely for a poor and black population in Washington, D.C., Presbyterian pastor Susan Andrews recalls days on the cancer ward where she was assigned. One day she entered the isolation unit to find “a wretched shell of a human being—legs and arms chewed up by gangrene, sweat pouring out of a shaking, stinking body.” “Dear God,” I thought, “what can I possibly say to this man?” Instinctively, the words of the Lord’s Prayer and the Twenty-third Psalm began welling up within her and she began saying them in his ear. As the familiar words filled the air, the wretched creature before her changed. He stopped shaking and looking into her eyes began to speak the words with her.

“In that moment, he traveled back home, back into the rooms of a long-lost faith. When this child of the covenant died an hour later, he had been welcomed by a loving God who had never left him

[*Christian Century*, April 14, 1999].

Our experience of the Good Shepherd and the exhilaration of his welcome is not, you see, a childish fantasy which leaves us as we establish ourselves in total independence. It is a welcome that stays with us our whole life long. It does not barricade us off from the world in which we live, but surrounding us with the strengthening presence of the Christ who walks with us and blesses us with sisters and brothers, it opens us to him, to his fellowship and to the world that he loves. It means, in the words of Kimberly Bracken Long,

In life and in death we belong not to ourselves but to Jesus. He leads us to the waters of baptism, and the font reminds us that we belong to him and to one another. He sets before us a table of love in face of all the world’s pain, and we remember that we are fed along the way, not just for our own sakes but for the sake of others, too. . . . From womb to tomb, font to grave, on whatever roads

we find ourselves, the shepherd leads us as one flock, gracing us with constant companionship and food for the journey, until he leads us safely home.”

—“The Shepherd Jesus,” *Journal for Preachers, Easter 2006*

Thanks be to God! *Thanks* be to God!