

“I am the good shepherd,” says Jesus in John’s Gospel. The image and metaphor of the Divine Shepherd is deeply significant for many Christians. For the first Christians, there are perhaps no depictions that capture their understanding of the human relationship with God more accurately than the representations of Christ, the Good Shepherd, bringing home his lost sheep. Images and symbols have been a part of Christianity from the earliest days of the church right up to the present, but for the first few hundred years there were only a few, and the Good Shepherd was among them.

Over time, the Good Shepherd faded somewhat from the popular expression of Christian symbolism and language. Images of the gracious and gentle shepherd lost ground to Medieval depictions of Christ as the omnipotent judge or the crucified sufferer, or to Renaissance images of the Mother and Child or the host of the Last Supper, or more recently, to various forms of Christ as heroic figure, even super-hero.

When we do encounter images of the Good Shepherd today, they often tend to be overly sentimental or in other ways far removed from the lives of first-century Palestinian Christians. Israel’s long history of life as semi-nomadic herders made sheep central to their economy. Sheep were the primary source of life—literally, God’s gift of sustenance for the people, so the image of God as shepherd is a reasonable one.

But the ancient experience of shepherding stressed the communal nature of the sheep, unlike the dominant culture of most of North America, which may well be the most individualistic in human history, perhaps especially so here in the Northwest. Social media, smartphones and other and technological advances make some incredible things possible, but they also allow for increasingly privatized lives, intensified loneliness, and a rise in the number of people who either feel disconnected from other people or who imagine that they have no need of other people.

And so perhaps the time has come to restore the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd to prominence. To come to know the Good Shepherd anew; to

go back to the beginning. The image of Christ the Good Shepherd is now such an established part of Christian symbolism and art, it would be easy to imagine that it is unique to Christianity. But its origin is much, much older. The Jewish roots of the Good Shepherd go back at least 1,000 years before Christ, and has evolved over time even up to our own day¹.

The beloved Psalm 23 that we prayed together this morning is the scriptural starting point and the pattern for a series of scripture that revisit this experience of God. In Psalm 23, the psalmist acclaims God as the shepherd who guides, comforts, and feeds the lost sheep, in this case, singular, and returns it to the flock and to God. Later, in the Hebrew Scriptures that we call “Jeremiah,” “Ezekiel” and “Zechariah,” God is still the Good Shepherd, but this shepherd brings back an entire lost flock, including any bad sheep, who were lost because of bad shepherds. Now, despite the reference to bad shepherds in Hebrew Scripture, the reference to God as the Good Shepherd is not simply the *opposite* of a bad shepherd. The more accurate rendering and a more compelling and liberating way to think about it is the “Model Shepherd.”

By the time we reach the Gospels of the Christian Evangelists, the promise of the incarnation of the Good Shepherd is fulfilled in the Word made Flesh, Jesus Christ. In John’s Gospel, the sheep are never lost and there are no bad shepherds, but the sheep and the shepherd are both under attack. The entire flock will be saved by the death and resurrection of the shepherd.

Consistently throughout all these portrayals of God as the Good Shepherd—from Psalm 23 through the prophets and the Gospels—throughout all these, God *feeds* the people through the agency of creation, that is to say, through earth’s gifts of food and drink. The prophets maintained that God, the Good Shepherd, also *guides* the people through the agency of leaders, of parents, of friends – people, that is, who care for the common good of all. People who are, *themselves*, model shepherds. God’s people who ally themselves to the lost or the marginalized. God’s people who feed the hungry with food and with hope; who bind up the injured, strengthen the weak and encourage the vulnerable. God’s good will for all God’s creatures becomes

¹ For more in-depth exploration of this pattern, see Kenneth E. Bailey. *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament*. Downer’s Grove, Ill.; InterVarsity Press, 2014.

visible, apparent and tangible through God's human agents, through people who are attentive to the well-being of others, through people who use their God-given gifts of reason and faith to respond to the needs of others, through people whose prayer leads to action.

Consequently, the image of the Good Shepherd captures an experience of the Divine that is nearly universal, but the ancients also us left a particular expression that is characteristically, if not uniquely, Christian—an expression that provides protection, nourishment and guidance for us even now. For centuries, artists, musicians and poets have sought to convey the grace-filled and simple truth of our relationship with God, the Good Shepherd.

In 1578, Antonio Bosio re-discovered a series of catacombs beneath Rome and the surrounding neighborhoods. Miles of winding underground tunnels were dug in the first three centuries; some may even go back to the apostolic age. Excavations began in the early 19th century and by the mid-1800s, the Christian art world became enamored of the rediscovered frescos painted on the walls of the catacombs. Historian Philip Schaff² has suggested that the Good Shepherd was among the most prominent and characteristic symbols of those 2nd to 4th century crypts. Not crucifixes or empty crosses or snippets of scripture, but Jesus Christ as the Good, the *Model*, Shepherd.

Image-makers were not sure how to portray Christ physically. They often painted him beardless and without the halo and long white robes that would come in later works. But in depicting aspects of their faith, the artists were clearly drawn to the kindness, the courage, the grace, the love and the beauty of the Good Shepherd.

One of the most compelling and earliest of these frescoes is in the catacombs of Priscilla, which now lies beneath the Via Salaria in Rome with its entrance in the Benedictine monastery of the Sisters of Priscilla. In the heart of the catacombs is a small chapel with a domed ceiling. And there on the ceiling is the original painting of the image that is on the cover of this morning's bulletin: a shepherd carrying a ram on his shoulders with two other sheep, one on either side. The "King of love" in Henry Baker's beautiful 19th c. hymn who "on his

² Philip Schaff. *History of the Christian Church*. 3rd ed. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996.

shoulder gently laid me and home rejoicing, brought me.” The shepherd in Isaac Watts’ 18th century hymn who “brings my wandering spirit back and leads me in paths of truth and grace.”

Two miles to the south of the image in the Priscilla catacombs is a similar fresco in the Callixtus catacombs. In both images, the shepherd is not alone. Both shepherds hold a ram on their shoulders and both extend a free hand, opened in a gesture of welcome, of hospitality. The hospitality of a good hostess preparing a table (and when Psalm 23 was captured, it would definitely have been a hostess) preparing a table, not for animals, but to welcome a community of people as guests at a celebration.

Both images show three sheep, a perfect number in scripture. In the Priscilla fresco, a pair of plump birds sit in green, living trees on either side of the shepherd. So the image is less about a single figure and much more about a community—a community in which one can find hospitality, the bonds of friendship, mutual guidance, strength, refreshment, and healing. That is to say, the image of the Good Shepherd is actually an image of the Christian community.

The image of the Model Shepherd is an image of you and of me with Christ in our midst. To live into that model is to *listen* for the voice of the one who has laid down his life for us and to *be guided* into caring for each other: to ally ourselves with the marginalized and to encourage the vulnerable. To speak out against injustice and act as though there is only one flock until that becomes as true for us as it is for God.

It is a terrible thing to be a sheep left alone in the wilderness of this world. We are one part of one flock that comprises many. We are not alone. Jesus Christ is the shepherd who knows us and we know Christ. The Model Shepherd has shared with us the foundational knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for the shepherd until there is peace and joy for the sheep—for *all* the sheep in *all* the flocks.

That compassion is the very quality in the Shepherd God that the psalmist praised—the quality that the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah taught us that the Shepherd God seeks in us; the holy quality imparted to us in our baptisms. The Good Shepherd stays with the sheep, in all that befalls each of

them and all them as a community. That abiding *presence* is what is holy. Presence, even in the valley of the shadow of death, offering the hope of return from danger and suffering.

Who do you know that needs to experience that compassion? Who do you know that needs to hear the loving and reassuring voice of the good shepherd?