

Good Shepherd Sunday runs the risk of slipping into sentimental loveliness and romantic nostalgia. The early church had other more serious intentions for the Sundays of the Easter season as they continued to expose the newly baptized to the mysteries of the faith. Every year, we pray or chant Psalm 23 on Good Shepherd Sunday and every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we follow a three-year cycle that focuses on slightly different images from the tenth chapter of St. John's Gospel.

In Year A, Christ is the gate of the sheepfold, an image that recalls the way that first-century Palestinian shepherds laid their bodies down for a night's rest in the gap of the fence, making their body into the gate. In Year B, Christ is the Good Shepherd who owns the flock, in contrast to hired help that may care more for themselves than for the sheep they tend. This year, Year C in the cycle, the gospel focuses on the voice of Christ, the word that gives life to those who hear it and follow.

The same life-giving word of Christ that Peter spoke to Tabitha, who heard and awoke in our first reading. The same life-giving word of the lamb at the center of the throne of God in the reading from Revelation—the lamb who is also our shepherd. Now, on most Good Shepherd Sundays, the Gospel reading allows for romantic, triumphant preaching. But there is something about today's reading that requires more reflection; something more challenging.

You see, sometimes scripture and life present problems that we can solve simply and plainly. And sometimes scripture and life present more complex situations that we can only ponder. And it these more complex situations we do not solve, but instead, if we sit with them, they "solve" us, in a way. Through them, God can transfigure us.

What John's Gospel presents this morning requires us to ruminate a bit. Let me remind you where we are in John's story: Jesus has healed a man born without sight and is interpreting that event in what we often call the "good shepherd discourse." These are the verses that we hear fragments of each year in which Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd—the One sent to lay down his life for us and to grant us life abundant.

This morning, John's Jesus is once again speaking to a group of Judeans; this time at the portico of Solomon. Now, the placement matters because this

cloister along the east side of the Temple's Outer Court in Jerusalem was where the rulers of Israel rendered judgments. Consequently, the people gathered there are accustomed to hearing clear proclamations, and so they expect Jesus to speak plainly and simply. Some are likely to be genuinely curious and hopeful, while others are mostly trying to trip him up.

“How long will you keep us in suspense?” they ask. “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Because there is no plain answer, what Jesus provides must be pondered: his *entire life* is the testimony that they are looking for. They are in suspense in part because they seek plain answers to a paradoxical reality that both defies simple explanation and yet is simplicity itself. Those who trust that Jesus is the Messiah were not convinced by an intellectually airtight dissertation, but by the life and actions of Jesus, their rabbi. “I *have* told you,” Jesus says, and indeed he has, with the way he has lived and loved.

“The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.” And right there—that is the moment where simple answers fall away, and have done for centuries. What does Jesus mean that they don’t believe because they aren’t his sheep? Some hear Jesus saying that it’s not up to them, as though they couldn’t trust even if they wanted to. Others say that Jesus is challenging them to look at the legacy of the life he has led, his teachings and his acts; that it is left entirely up to them to respond to the voice of the shepherd.

For centuries, theologians have grappled with these questions, and most of their answers have been placed in one of two camps. At one end of the spectrum are those who deny free will and insist that because God’s infinite wisdom and justice are supreme above all that God determined from before the foundations of time who will believe and who will not. At the other end of the spectrum are those who deny all forms of predestination and insist that human free will is responsible for trust and salvation.

Both of these positions are over-simplified versions of more nuanced teaching about how much of our belief is dependent on God’s agency and how much is up to us. But, truthfully, debating the relative merits of these positions is mostly useful for seminary students. Because, you see, the search for *certainty* puts us in the same position as those gathered at the portico of Solomon. And in exactly the same way, our answer from Jesus is to relax into the *mystery*, the suspense, that is inherent in a life of faith.

The early church knew the value of the practice of contemplation. And this passage from John about the Good Shepherd makes for quite fruitful pondering. Setting aside the quest for certainty allows us to make ourselves curious, open and present to the voice of God, in the hopes that God will use our unknowing to transfigure us; to change the way that we figure things out. The life of Jesus taught the early church that our relationship with the Divine is more persuasive when it is actually experienced—that it begins with when we first *apprehend* that which we cannot yet fully *comprehend*.

Then, like the newly baptized, as we become increasingly aware of that relationship, God can guide our questions and our curiosity about our faith through the community of God's people. You and I are among the great multitude that cannot be counted, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the Lamb who is our Shepherd. Together with the great cloud of witnesses, we still respond to the promise that Jesus speaks: "*No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.*"

The crucified and risen Jesus Christ will hold on to us through all things—God will never let go of the working single mother fretting over her family or the retiree wondering what to do at the conclusion of his career. God will never let go of the child afraid for her safety at home; will never let go of the person worried about being stopped by police because of his skin color nor will God let go of the police officer who never knows what will happen when she arrives on the scene. God will never lose the one mired in grief at the loss of a beloved spouse or the one shattered by the disintegration of a relationship.

God will abandon no one and nothing will be lost. No one here is extra or unnecessary or unloved. "No one," our lamb and shepherd promises, "*No one will snatch them out of my hand.*"

There is a small brick building in Ravenna, Italy, called the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia. Built sometime around 430 C.E, the mausoleum is famous for its ancient and breathtaking mosaics. And perhaps the most important mosaic is depiction of Christ as the Good Shepherd that you can see over the entrance on the north side. Images of Jesus as shepherd were among the most prevalent of all depictions in the Roman catacombs of earlier centuries, but there are important developments to be seen in this version.

Instead of being shown as a typical countryman, this Good Shepherd has a large golden halo, wears a royal purple mantle over a golden tunic and holds a

tall cross. On either side of him are two groups of three sheep, gazing peacefully and adoringly up at their Shepherd—*beholding* him. Christ tenderly touches the nose of one of them.

It is, for me, an image of God's immediate and ongoing decision to choose us, to love us, to save us. No matter how difficult or lonely or stressful or frightening our lives are, *nevertheless*, God chooses us, loves us, accompanies us, and will hold onto us through all of life and through death into the new resurrection life.

God leaves *no one*. *Nothing* is left behind.

Even our brokenness is transfigured. In his own resurrection, Christ's wounds do not disappear, but instead are glorified. Not by explaining, but by *beholding* this mystery, we come to realize our shared nature with the Lamb, the Given, who is also our Shepherd, the Giver, and we participate in the Self-giving, the Divine outpouring of love for the world.