

Easter 4B: John 10:11-18, Psalm 23
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Thinking in Pictures

Years ago, on the news program *60 Minutes* the singer Paul Simon was talking with Ed Bradley about the song “Mrs. Robinson.” You know, the one with the line, “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio, a nation turns its lonely eyes to you.” Apparently, right after the song was released, DiMaggio contacted Simon and Garfunkel to express bafflement as to what that line could possibly mean. DiMaggio insisted he hadn’t gone anywhere—why, he was a spokesman for Mr. Coffee now! What they meant by it, Simon explained to Bradley, was that baseball used to be a metaphor for America, and DiMaggio was the embodiment of those values: excellence, perseverance, grace, dignity. DiMaggio’s confusion, Simon observed, was because he “had not yet begun to think of himself as a metaphor.”

Fair enough, but who does think of him- or herself metaphorically? Wouldn’t we wonder about a co-worker who regularly declares, “I am the antibody that protects my family from the virus of secularism” or “I am the oil that keeps our company’s pistons lubricated”? Who talks that way?

Well, Jesus did. Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus says things like “I am the bread of life.” “I am the light of the world.” “I am the true vine.” In today’s reading, it’s “I am the good shepherd.” C.S. Lewis once observed that a man who says things like this is either the single most important person you might ever meet or else on par with someone who walks around claiming to be a poached egg!

But as shocking as Jesus’ “I am” statements may be, they don’t get a lot of attention, not like his parables. Maybe it’s because the images he evokes seem stayed and lifeless. There’s no story attached, no action. Then again, that criticism may have more to do with us and our assumptions than it does about the statements themselves.

Kenneth Bailey is a New Testament scholar who’s spent forty years in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem and Cyprus, and has written several books trying to highlight the Middle Eastern context of the Bible for Western Christians. Bailey explains that the average Middle Easterner does not “illustrate ideas,” rather he or she “thinks in pictures.” So whereas we in the West might speak of God in precise statements like the Nicene Creed, a Middle Easterner would more naturally offer concrete images, likening God to a king or potter or place of refuge. This isn’t a matter of “illustrating” some abstract idea about God. Rather these pictures seek to capture truths that can’t be easily reduced to words.

If that is the case, then what is the image of the shepherd meant to convey about God or Jesus? For most of us, we hear talk of shepherds and we immediately think of peaceful, bucolic scenes of rolling green hills, dry stone walls, and beautiful Lakeland countryside. Or else we think of art we’ve seen, such as the drawing in the church office or in the glass above the altar, which show Jesus cradling a cute lamb. It’s a comforting image, for children and adults alike.

Yet for Jesus and his contemporaries, the image of the shepherd did not convey softness and serenity, but rather subversion and violence. You see, the Middle Eastern shepherd was beset by dangers on every side. His days were spent fending off predators and bandits while navigating hostile terrain with a bunch of unruly sheep. It took tenacity, devotion, cunning, at times a little bit of ferocity, and a willingness to risk his life daily for his flock.

Beyond the common experience of shepherding, though, there was also a long history of God's servants being described as shepherds. This goes back to Moses and King David, who had both previously been shepherds before God called them. It was David who then returned the favor, famously describing God himself as a shepherd. "The Lord is my shepherd," he says in Psalm 23. Indeed, this psalm can help us better understand just what Jesus was getting at, calling himself the good shepherd.

To begin with, it's worth noting, that, of all the images from the psalms Jesus could have chosen—"my strength, my shield, my rock, my tower, my sure defense"—he chose to identify himself as a shepherd. Maybe it's because a shepherd is not like a rock—stationary, unmoving. A shepherd goes out with the flock, moves with them, facing the same dangers they do. God may indeed be a rock in times of danger, but outside of such crises, 'shepherd' seemed a more fitting metaphor for Jesus, someone who leads us through life's challenges to green pastures.

What it means to be a good shepherd is developed in the next line, "I shall not want." Of all the claims, this one is especially hard for us to believe. For, we live in a culture and an economy predicated on creating and then satisfying as many wants as possible, telling us if we only had this medication or that electronic gadget, we'd be healthy, happy, and successful. The wants the shepherd provides, though, are more basic: food, drink, peace, rescue when lost, freedom from fear, comfort and security amidst danger, an abiding sense of God's presence. Notice that not on this list is an ever-rising mountain of material possessions. Nor is there any hint of a need for power or control, or the need to be constantly entertained. What the psalmist *needs*, the shepherd provides.

The psalm then lists the wondrous ways God as shepherd provides these needs. "He settles me down in green pastures, he leads me besides still waters" - food and drink. "He brings me back, leads me in paths of righteousness" - rescue, redemption. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil" - freedom from fear. "For you are with me, you're rod and your staff, they comfort me" - comfort, security. "You prepare a table before me" - food and drink, again. "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever"—an abiding sense of God's presence.

The thing about these provisions is that God cannot force us to accept them, any more than a shepherd can force sheep to lie down and rest. Sheep are notoriously skittish. It doesn't take much to spook them. Last year, Anna and I lucked upon the British documentary, *Clarkson's Farm*, which is about the TV celebrity Jeremy Clarkson and his (often humorous) attempts to make his 1,000-acre farm profitable. One of his schemes is to raise sheep. But no sooner are the sheep delivered than something spooks them and they escape over the rock wall of the pasture. Clarkson and his farmhand spend hours trying to retrieve the fugitive flock as they gamble down

the country road, skitting away every time they get close. Had there been a Middle Eastern shepherd there, likely he'd be doubled over in laughter. "You silly *goyem!* You're doing it wrong. Sheep can't be herded, they must be led. Once they know you, once they recognize your voice they'll follow you. Until then, you're just going to give them heart attacks, chasing them around like that!" It's a fitting metaphor for us humans. We naturally resist compulsion and coercion, someone telling us what to do. But we will follow someone, anyone we think can show us the way. Or failing that, we'll just follow the herd.

Now, even if we manage to follow the right Shepherd, that doesn't prevent us from straying at times, any more than it stops a sheep from wandering from the flock. When that happens, the shepherd has to go and bring them back. This is what God does for us too. Though you wouldn't know it from how the psalm is usually translated. The King James Version gave us the phrase, "He restored my soul." But a literal translation is "he brings me back," as in he turns me around, puts back on the right path. What this suggests is that what we need is not just cheering up, but rescue. Indeed, the image is of a shepherd leaving the rest of the flock to find the one lost sheep who's now hiding under a bush or rock, quivering and bleating, hoping the shepherd finds it before some wild animal does. It's really a vivid, concrete image. When we trade it in for an abstract idea, like "a restored soul," we lose something important, something powerful, something that connects the shepherd image to the stories of the lost being found, stories of God bringing wayward souls back to the fold.

Still, being lost is not the only danger facing sheep. Throughout the Holy Land, at the bottom of valleys, winter streams cut long, deep crevices in the rock. One such valley is the entrance to the city of Petra in Southern Jordan. I got to see the famous city years ago, which you get to by following a maze of ravines, the sides of which can reach upwards of 30 feet high. Thankfully it was fall when I visited, because, when the winter rains come, flash floods can rip through the ravines without warning. This happened in 1957 when a wall of water rushed through the gulley killing some 50 French tourists. Ravines like these are certainly "valleys of death." They wind their way in-between mountains, cutting deep gorges and dark shadows. Even when not at risk of flooding, the valleys were places of danger. Travelers would march slowly and silently through them in order to avoid being seen or heard by bandits. The fear of death constantly in their minds, expecting trouble at any time.

Thing is, in many cases these valleys cannot be avoided. There is no bypass and no magical escape. The only way forward is through the valley of death. This is a lesson to us in itself. Some people who suffer loss imagine that they are trapped in the dark valley. Other times the fear of having to go through that valley is enough to paralyze us. Not so for the psalmist. The psalmist knows the journey passes *through* the valley of the shadow of death, it does not end there. He knows that the dark valley is a defile through which he must one day pass, but he never contemplates staying there. He trusts that that God is with him, with his rod and staff to defend and guide him, and so he will make it through.

The end of his journey, the psalmist knows, is in fact in the Lord's house. Passing through the valley, he looks forward to being welcomed at the Lord's table, a seat having been prepared for him, where there are all the best of foods, more than he could ever enjoy, so much so the dishes cannot contain it. "My cup runs over." Around him will be all his enemies, those who sought to

do him harm, who still resent the special care God has shown him. Yet his place at God's table is secure. He "will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

In the face of the tendency we have to abstract the nature of God, to reduce concrete experiences to featureless universals, the image of God as shepherd makes God real, relatable. It puts meat on the bones of our confessions of faith. Even if we don't know what it is like to be a shepherd, we can understand how God is like a shepherd. It connects God with daily life.

More than that, the image contains within it the whole of salvation history, all the major themes. Look again at Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd"—God chooses Israel to be his people, his flock. He "leads them to green pastures and still waters"—God brought them to the Promised Land. Throughout their life in the Promised Land, God's people repeatedly faced threats of extermination. They "walked through the valley of the shadow of death" more than once, and utter destruction seemed always around the bend. But God "brought them back" from the brink. God was never far away. "You are with me," they declared. This boast becomes substantially true in the Incarnation, in Jesus, Emmanuel, literally "God with us." Walking with us through the valley of death, dying and rising for us, he made it so we "fear death" no longer. God continues to watch over his flock, both those of his first fold, as well as newcomers, us Christians, guiding and defending us with rod and staff, his word and his example. And together we look forward to the day when we can sit down at God's table, a foretaste of which we enjoy when we share in communion. It's all there, all of salvation history is there *in a nutshell* in Psalm 23!

So, when we recite this psalm with our children before bedtime or read it at funerals, we are not just recalling some tranquil, bucolic life that we frankly have never known. Rather, we are making a powerful confession of how God has acted for his people, his flock, and asserting our faith that he will bring us through, bring us through death to dwell with the Lord forever! That's a lot going on there in one image, one metaphor. But understanding it helps us to appreciate why our predecessors here decided to name this parish what it did. We are the Church of the Good Shepherd, members of God's own flock, sinners of his own redeeming. And so we say, Baaah...I mean, Thanks be to God!