

**“A Beloved Image of a Wonderful God”**

**Psalm 23:1-6; John 10:1-18**

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There are many images of God in scripture because no single image can capture the Divine. In fact, the very idea of trying to do so is idolatrous, though some images are more helpful than others. For example, Jonathan Edwards’ well-known sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” presents an image most of us find disturbing, though Edwards was a brilliant theologian, a leading voice in the First Great Awakening in the eighteenth century. But we try not to allow anger to define our relationship with our children, though they can make us angry. Surely God’s way of relating to us is not defined by anger.

But there are many images that help us understand who God is, and who Jesus is, and one of the most beloved is the image of shepherd. This is partly because of the popularity of Psalm 23 and partly because Jesus uses the image for himself in the passage we have read from John 10. The image of shepherd is also applied to key leaders in prophetic literature and it is used for pastors, though Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, has suggested that we are more like sheep dogs for the Good Shepherd. I’m okay with that imagery.

But the image of shepherd for God and Christ is much-loved and I suspect this is mostly because it resonates with our experience — not just our thinking about who God is, but our experience with the Holy. In many different ways, we experience God as the Good Shepherd who cares for us, the sheep. We read about this in scripture, including the texts we have read today, but we also know this from our own experience, and we are grateful that we do.

For if God is our shepherd, then we have an intimate way of relating to the Creator of the universe. The basic idea of God or Christ as shepherd, even without considering any biblical text, is personal in nature. It is not an image of the Holy as some kind of abstract power or

force, like Paul Tillich's Ground of Being, though such images have value too, they tell us something important about God. But the image of shepherd is a personal image of a Deity we can relate to intimately.

In the reading from John 10, Jesus underscores this perspective by saying the shepherd knows the sheep by name and the sheep know the shepherd's voice. He also says he is the shepherd, the good shepherd, though he is also the gate that keeps out trouble and lets sheep in; multiple images are found within one short passage. But the notions of God in Christ knowing us by name and us recognizing God's voice point to a very personal way of relating to the Holy.

And lest we question whether the metaphor works on a practical level, Palestinian shepherds have been known to call their sheep by name — long ears or white nose — and sheep recognize a familiar voice. The image has some basis in the real world, which we might assume since it is developed in a context where people relate to sheep every day. In fact, in places where people still do, there are details about shepherding that enable us to find even more meaning in the metaphor.

In Scotland, for example, where there are more sheep than people, sheep are marked with various colors of paint for a number of reasons, but one of these is to keep track of which sheep belong to whom. As sheep wander all over the place, there just aren't enough fences to keep them all separated by owner. In like manner, God the Good Shepherd marks us — in baptism — we are claimed in love, we are known by name, and we recognize the One who claims us. It is a wonderful thing, to relate to the Creator of the universe in this way. But it is also unsettling.

In the book *Mr. God, This Is Anna* the author describes the first evening he spent with a young girl who had been abandoned. She knelt down to say her prayers before getting into bed and she began by saying, "Mr. God, this is Anna talking," and she continued in such a familiar way, the author says he got the uneasy feeling that Someone was looking over his shoulder. I had a similar experience as a teenager. I had not been raised in the church and so I was exploring the possibility of faith for the first time. One evening I cried out in the darkness for some clear

sign that God exists, but almost immediately I was moved to a sense of awe at the very idea of God showing up in a personal way.

Intimacy with the Divine can be unsettling, yet in the end, having a personal relationship with our Creator is wonderful. It is a gift at any place in life, but especially at places like this. We are separated from one another, from this sacred space, from many activities and rituals that enhance faith. But we are not separated from God, the Good Shepherd who knows us by name and whose voice we know. We need to cultivate our relationship with God through habits of spiritual discipline — prayer, meditation, Lectio Divina, walking the labyrinth, journaling — but we have an invitation to relate to God in ways that even a pandemic cannot take away. God is our shepherd, our intimate friend, our personal guide.

But if God is our shepherd, we not only have an intimate way of relating to our Creator; we are cared for in every way in overabundance. The psalmist says that because God is his shepherd, he will not want for anything. God will make him lie down in green pastures, lead him beside still waters and restore his soul. God will lead him in the right paths, accompany him in the darkest places of life and comfort him with a shepherd's rod and staff. God will fill his cup to overflowing and surround him with goodness and mercy throughout his life.

In other words, the Good Shepherd provides in overabundance for our every need physically, emotionally and spiritually. Eugene Peterson translated this way, "God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing... Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure... You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies..." Our own Elmo Scoggin put it this way, "The Lord God Ineffable is the one guiding my life, therefore, I lack nothing. He stretches me out comfortably in beautiful grassy meadows. He guides me unerringly to deep pure water. He constantly renews my whole being and guides me gently into righteous paths." God our Good Shepherd provides for our every need.

Even the reference to a rod and staff communicates shepherd care. Many quote the proverb — spare the rod and spoil the child — as some kind of blessing of physical discipline, but what exactly is a rod? The shepherd's rod is not a tool of punishment. It is what the shepherd uses

to guide the sheep gently, to keep sheep from falling off the side of a cliff, of which there are many in Israel. The psalmist says the shepherd uses the rod and the staff to comfort him. Everything the Shepherd God provides is an instrument of comfort and care, compassion and love.

Jesus extends this image, saying he is the good shepherd, the one who cares for his sheep. It is why they listen to his voice and follow him. When one hears the voice of someone who has caused harm or proven to be unreliable, the tendency is to run away or attack. Sheep know this, as do sheep dogs, as do we. Just because a voice is familiar does not make it attractive. The key is having had a positive experience with the person whose voice we hear. Anyone who has heard Christ's voice knows he brings only kindness. He is the good shepherd who has cared for us before. So we trust that he will care for us now.

This too is a gift at all places in life, but especially in places like this. There are many uncertainties right now. We don't know when we will begin returning to normal activity or how slowly we will have to do so. We don't know when and how businesses and schools will open or when we will start phasing in church activities. We don't know the extent of the economic impact of this virus, though we know millions of people have lost pay and jobs. We don't know if we will become ill, how we might fare, when the virus might return, when tests and vaccines and treatments will be readily available. There are so many unknowns.

But we know that the Shepherd God will care for us somehow – through the people around us, if only through a phone call or written note; through the gifts of music, art and nature; through laughter and tears; through these shared times of worship and personal times of devotion; through some indescribable way of touching us inside and lifting our spirits. These are difficult times, we are walking through a dark valley, but God will see us through.

In late January, another part of the Pakistani family connected to our church finally made it to the U.S. and Raleigh. We were delighted to see them, though surely not quite as delighted as their family here, and we tried to help them in the ways we could. As they settled in to the place U.S.C.R.I. acquired for them, one immediate need they identified was for a washer and dryer. Two parents and three small children need a

washer and dryer! I reached out to CBF missions partners Marc and Kim Wyatt to see if they knew of anyone who had a washer and dryer to donate, and I planned to check with some other sources, but before I could, the Wyatts emailed me back and said that a woman who knew of their work had called earlier in the day and said she had a washer and dryer to give to someone.

Now, I am not prone to find some theological explanation that borders on the magical for every circumstance of life. And this experience depended on a number of human variables — who the Wyatts are, the fact that CBF brought them here, who we are as a church, the fact we have cared about this extended family of refugees, and ultimately the kindness of Bob Kimball, Charles Petty and Dennis Ellis who moved and installed the units. But it's pretty difficult even for a cynic like me not to see God's hand at work in this experience. The very fact that they made it here from Sri Lanka after years of waiting for refugee status — this year but before COVID-19 and the travel restrictions that have come with it — seems like a gift of grace.

But then, God is the Good Shepherd who provides for our every need in overabundance. Surely we can trust God to take care of us through this challenging time.

But there is one further thing we need to say about God's shepherd care. In the reading from John 10, Jesus says that while a hired hand will not take any risks to protect sheep — for example, he will run away if wolves attack — the good shepherd is willing to take whatever risks are necessary. The Good Shepherd, as in Jesus himself, lays down his life for the sheep. It's one thing to know us and to care for us. It is quite another thing to risk and give all for us. But this is how we understand the cross — God's own self is given in love for us.

We need to use care in thinking about the cross. The message is not that God kills off one man in the pattern of a sacrificial system to satisfy some ritual requirement for forgiveness. God is actually in this man. God is in Christ in a unique way. This is the message of incarnation, the point behind the stories of holy birth. So, the message of the cross is that God empties a part of God's own self into this act of

suffering love, God lays down God's life for us — to identify with our brokenness and to offer us redemption in a way that transcends all of our theories of atonement. The message is that God is the kind of shepherd who will give all — meaning ALL — if necessary, for us.

This act of self-giving in Jesus is unique, *monogenes* in the Greek, one of a kind. But this pattern of self-giving love is something Christians are called to follow, and some have quite literally. I think of the Reverend John Lamb Prichard, whom I referenced two weeks ago, a Baptist pastor who died in Wilmington in 1862 of Yellow Fever because he remained in the city to care for people who were sick. I think of Father Damien, the nineteenth-century priest who ministered among people in a leper colony on the Hawaiian island Molokai until he contracted the illness and died. There are many followers of the Good Shepherd who have laid down their lives for others, and even more who have at least sacrificed something for others. It is our calling. We not only believe in but follow a shepherd who lays down life for sheep.

Those who have worshiped in this sanctuary may have noticed that we have beautiful stained glass but only one window with a pictorial image. It is the large image displayed above the choir loft. It is an image of Jesus the Good Shepherd holding a baby sheep, a lamb. It is not surprising, given how beloved this image is. I have often wondered how many people how found comfort and strength looking up at that image during worship in some time of great need. I have heard enough stories to know that this happens often.

The church I served in Winston-Salem has a huge cross suspended over the central pulpit and every other month people come forward and receive communion kneeling before that cross. While some don't think Baptists should practice kneeling communion, the vast majority of church members have some of their most meaningful experiences kneeling before that cross.

We worship every week before an image of the Good Shepherd who knows us by name, provides for our every need and ultimately lays down life for us. What a gift! What an image! What a wonderful God we know and love!