

“Some Images of God Are More Helpful than Others”

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. But 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. Edwards was a brilliant theologian, a leading voice in the First Great Awakening in the eighteenth century. But while our children can make us angry, we try not to allow anger to define our relationships with them. 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. The truth is this image was popular throughout the ancient Near East, as Assyria’s Tiglath-Pileser III was characterized as the shepherd of humanity; the Sumerian deity Elil was the faithful shepherd, master of all nations; and Babylon’s Marduk was portrayed as a shepherd. But for us it 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 is also applied to key prophetic figures in scripture, and it is used for pastors to this day, though Craig Barnes, former president of Princeton Theological Seminary, suggests we are sheep dogs...

But the image of shepherd for God and Christ is much-loved mostly because it resonates with our experience — not just our thinking about who God is, but our experience with the Holy. In many ways we experience God as the Good Shepherd who cares for us. 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 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.

Lest we question whether the metaphor is based in reality, Palestinian shepherds have been known to call their sheep by name — long ears or white nose — and sheep recognize their voices. I haven't asked Sheila Jordan, who was a sheep farmer, whether she named her sheep, but the image has some basis in reality, which we might assume since it was developed in a context where people related 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 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 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 or to still waters, and restore his soul, or perhaps better put, whole being. God will lead him in the right paths, the ones he should walk,

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, 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.

In this month's issue of *The Christian Century*, author Amy Leach tells a story about a time she and her family were auditioning to become a foster home for puppies (p. 27). The woman from Rover Rescue came to their house to see how their dogs behaved around them. With dogs, there is no acting, they express their feelings openly and honestly. If

someone has harmed them, they will respond with fear or aggression. If someone has shown affection, even a little bit, they will jump with joy.

Tusker used to bring me a shoe when I came home, his update of the pipe and slippers, and I would always say, “At least somebody loves me.” When Amy Leach’s husband came home, the Rover Rescue lady got to witness Annabelly, a labrador, flinging herself through the air repeatedly to look through a window with ears afloat, as if to say, “It’s you, it’s you, you’re home, you’re home!” Witnessing this was convincing evidence that they would be a good foster home.

“Animals know kindness from cruelty,” Leach writes, “even sheep, who are not the sharpest tools in the shed.” Sometimes we’re not much sharper than sheep to which Jesus compares us... but we do know kindness from cruelty, we can tell the difference in other people, especially leaders, and we can tell the difference in God.

But there is one further thing we need to say about God’s shepherd care. In the reading from John 10, Jesus talks about other parties who try to lead the sheep astray, thieves and robbers. This may be a reference to the Pharisees who have just questioned his healing of a man born blind or perhaps other messiah figures in his time. There are always competing voices seeking people’s devotion, all claiming to speak for God. He also says that while a hired hand will not take any risks to protect sheep — for example, he will run away if wolves attack — the shepherd is willing to take whatever risks are necessary.

The Good Shepherd, as in Jesus himself, is not like these false leaders or even the hired hand. He lays down his life for the sheep. It’s one thing to know us and 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 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 in this act of suffering love,

God lays down life for us — to identify with our brokenness and offer us redemption in a way that transcends all theories of atonement. The message is that God is the kind of shepherd who will give all for us.

Jesus' sacrifice is unique, but the 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, 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. I think of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who gave his life for racial justice and Colombian Catholic Priest Hector Gallego who sacrificed his life for the rights of farm workers in Panama.

There are many followers of the Good Shepherd who have laid down their lives for others and more who have sacrificed something for others. It is our calling. We not only believe in a shepherd who lays down life for sheep, we follow him in this pattern of living.

We have beautiful stained glass in this sanctuary, including a Rose Window, 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 lamb. It is not surprising, given how beloved this image is. I have often wondered how many people have found comfort and strength looking at this image during worship in a time of great need. I have heard enough stories to know that this happens often.

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. There are other images of Jesus. Many want a Warrior Christ who models a more macho form of masculinity. And there is some history of this in church practice. In the fourth century images of a Good Shepherd were replaced by Jesus as Pantocrator, the elevated ruler of all, as Constantine united the church with the secular state. But the Warrior Christ has brought only pain and suffering, never enduring peace, a poor witness to the world. The image of a Good Shepherd who cares for us and all people is a better image for this time and all times.