

April 21, 2024 @ Trinity Bixby  
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Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

The fourth Sunday of Eastertide is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday” in many churches, because the lectionary texts always focus on images of God as a shepherd for the people. This theme runs deep in both the Old and New Testaments, shaping our understanding of God’s care and the responsibilities of those who lead the people.

David, the model of what a king of Israel is supposed to be, was first a shepherd. This humble beginning resonated strongly with the people. His poetic portrayal of God as his shepherd in Psalm 23 strengthens this tie even further. But David wasn’t alone; the patriarchs Abraham, Lot, and Isaac also tended flocks as part of their portable wealth. Even Jacob, in his dealings with Laban, engaged in the care of flocks.

The prophets, too, employed the shepherd metaphor to address the failings of leaders. Isaiah wrote a beautiful passage, describing God as a shepherd who gathers up the lambs into God’s arms, carrying them close to God’s heart.<sup>1</sup> The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel refer to corrupt leaders as “false shepherds” who destroy and scatter the sheep. In response, God promises to either raise up new shepherds who will care for the people with righteousness and justice, or to personally care for the sheep himself.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Zechariah describes the sheep themselves turning away from the good shepherds that God has provided.<sup>3</sup>

It shouldn’t surprise us, then, that the advent of the Messiah was heralded with shepherding terms. Micah 5:4 states that a ruler will come from Bethlehem, who will “stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.”

When we turn to the New Testament, Matthew describes Jesus as having compassion on the crowds because they were “harassed and helpless, like sheep

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 40:11

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 23:1-4, Ezekiel 34:1-10

<sup>3</sup> Zechariah 11:4-17

without a shepherd.”<sup>4</sup> And of course, John explicitly has Jesus say, “I am the Good Shepherd,” connecting with the legacy of shepherds as leaders of the people of God.

From that point, leaders in the church are also referred to as shepherds. Pastor means shepherd – it derives from a Latin word that means, “one who feeds or causes to graze.” In Christian art, bishops and abbots are often shown carrying a shepherd’s crook, symbolizing this same thing – authority as a shepherd of God’s people. It’s not just art – in the Catholic and Orthodox churches, specially individualized and decorated shepherds’ crooks, called croziers, are signs of bishops that are carried in procession and used in special services.

So, what is it about the image of the Good Shepherd that continues to resonate with us? I suggest that the image of God as the Good Shepherd, and the leaders of the church as shepherds of God’s flock, connects to three main aspects – that a good shepherd gives, guards, and guides. The shepherd gives the flock attention, noting which sheep need time to rest, and calling each sheep by name. The shepherd guards the flock, being alert for danger as the flock sleeps at night and as they travel through dark valleys to graze on the hills beyond. And the shepherd guides the flock, leading them to green pastures of grass newly refreshed, and along the paths of righteousness.

First, the Good Shepherd gives. The shepherd provides all that the flock needs – food, either through pasture or fodder; water, from still ponds or troughs; shelter, in the protected fold or a barn. Indeed, in the bramble fence folds, like the one pictured on the bulletin cover, the shepherd becomes the door of the fold, protecting the sheep by keeping them together during the night. In this way, the shepherd gives them a chance to rest without worry through the night. The Good Shepherd provides for all of us in this way, too. In the middle of dark nights of the soul, when we toss and turn with worry, God holds us with open arms, and comforts us. As we are fed and sheltered by God, we are called in turn to help feed and shelter those in need. We give to others because God first gave to us. This is what it means that God

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 9:36

prepares a table before us in front of our rivals – not that we eat apart from them, but that, through God’s generous giving, we eat together. We eat together, putting aside our differences. We eat together, knowing that there is enough and more than enough, because of God’s generosity and grace. We eat together, and find that we are one flock after all!

Second, the Good Shepherd guards. When we travel through dangerous places, God looks out for us, calling our name when we get too close to bad places. When our life journey takes us through darkened valleys, we are not alone. Our shepherd walks alongside us, protecting us with rod and staff, or even a sling to scare away danger at a distance. God is our refuge and strength, the constant source of comfort and protection. This is what it means to return to the house of God our whole life long. When we encounter violence and division in the world, God calls us to be agents of peace and reconciliation, embodying God’s love and compassion in all that we do. The protection of the Good Shepherd gives us the strength to stand, calmly and firmly, in the face of adversity and oppression, knowing that love is with us always.

Thirdly, the Good Shepherd guides. We are led along “worn paths of what is right, to remember the Holy Name.” In other words, the Way of Jesus is not just the twists and turns of our physical journey, but the constant practice of love and service. Indeed, when Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd in John’s gospel, he follows that statement immediately with the action of laying down his life for the sheep. He cares for each of us so deeply that he gave his life for us – and in so doing, he guided us to life eternal with him. Jesus guides us, too, through connecting us with God and each other. “Love God with all your being” Jesus tells us, citing Deuteronomy. And he continues, citing Leviticus, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In guiding us to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love ourselves, Jesus shows us the Way forward.

The Good Shepherd gives, guards, and guides us. And we, in turn, are to be little shepherds in the same mold! You may remember that the word “Christian” was once a derogatory term levied at followers of Jesus. It means, “little Christs” or

“little messiahs.” But, what was once a mocking term is now something we take on ourselves. We are the flock of Christ, the sheep led to green grass and still water, and our Good Shepherd calls us to be shepherds in turn. To give, to guard, and to guide in following his way. When we face difficulty, we turn to Christ, knowing deep within that he will help us. When we see injustice, we can see that the Holy Spirit is with us, helping to turn our path back to righteousness. And when all is well with us, when we are fed and sheltered, we call to others, and give them what God has given us – love and compassion, food and shelter, and faith that God is always near.