

Good Shepherd 2020

Scriptures

Acts 6:1–9, 7:2a, 51–60

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:13–25

John 10.1-10

Opening

In the middle of every Eastertide we hear our Lord Jesus announce, “I am the Good Shepherd.” This name is so comforting, so encouraging, so familiar we develop overly sentimental ways of thinking about our Good Shepherd in the world. St Augustine said, “He would not have added *good* were there not bad shepherds as well.”¹ Christ will not permit us to envision the good shepherd leading his flock through a world of innocence.

I like the picture of that innocent world. I like a shepherd who leads his sheep to pasture in the cool of the day, then to shade and still water in the heat of the afternoon, returning home at dusk to a cottage fire and shepherd’s pie. Instead of that idyllic world, our Lord Jesus describes a very different world. He anticipates adversaries: thieves and robbers; hirelings and wolves. Our Good Shepherd reveals his goodness in a rugged, endangered world.

When we explore this parable further, we often focus on these adversaries and read the story as an allegory. Thieves and robbers represent false prophets and scribes; hirelings represent Pharisees, the wolf represents our ancient Enemy, Satan. There’s other ways to interpret these characters, but this is the most common interpretation.

¹ Augustine of Hippo, St. Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies, 1888, 7.

This year I want to take a different angle to this story. I want to explore how Jesus **defends** his flock from danger. I want to meditate on three defenses our Lord uses to guard his flock: the shepherd's voice, the sheepfold, and the gate.

The Shepherd's Voice

The first defense is the shepherd's voice. The latter two defenses are external, the sheepfold and the gate. The first defense is *internal*, it's a sensory defense.

"The sheep hear (the shepherd's) voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." ² Yes, the sheep know their Shepherd's voice, but how did it get to be so? From their birth they learn their names—the name the shepherd gives them. They hear his voice when they are lambs, when they become fully grown ewes and rams. They hear his voice in spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Every day they hear the same voice. They learn his call, his commands.

A stranger once challenged this reality to a Syrian shepherd. The stranger believed it was the *dress*, not the voice that the sheep trusted. So the Syrian shepherd exchanged outer garments with the stranger, and the stranger began to mimic the shepherd's call, trying to lead them. No movement. As soon as the Syrian shepherd sounded his familiar call, the flock came to his side though he was disguised. ³

Our Good Shepherd is also the Word of God. We cannot follow the Good Shepherd without training our ears to the Word of God. I used to hear spiritual mentors say that if you've not trained your ears, your mind, your heart to listen to the Word of God everyday, you won't be ready when crisis comes. I didn't think that was true as a young man, proud as I was to trust in my own strength. Now I'm a firm believer that's true in the middle of my life.

² The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 10:3.

³ Orientalisms in Bible Lands, by E. W. Rice, pp. 159-161. via <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/101970048>

I must learn the shepherd's call when he comes to console and heal; when he calls me to repent or take up my cross; when he teaches and counsels my heart. You cannot know the Good Shepherd's voice unless you listen to the whole Word of God. Not just the parts you like, but the *whole* Word of God.

When you listen to the Word of God each day; when you submit your heart to the *whole* Word of God, you can recognize the imitation calls of bad shepherds. That internal defense says, 'this doesn't sound right. This is not the voice of the Good Shepherd.'

Remember when Satan quoted Scripture to Jesus in the wilderness? Jesus recognized Satan as a bad shepherd even though the devil quoted scripture. Scripture can be used to mimic the shepherd's voice. Here's two key tests to tell difference: is Scripture being used to tempt me with power, to escape pain, to make a name for myself? Ah, there's the wrong note. Scripture calls me to ***faithfulness***, not power. I don't need to make a name for myself because the Good Shepherd calls me by name. I am his own.

In Eastertide I think how the Good Shepherd appears to Mary Magdalene on Resurrection morning. Mary Magdalene looks into Jesus' eyes at the empty tomb and cannot recognize the Lord with her eyes. But then he speaks her name. She immediately knew who called her. Because the sheep know the Shepherd's voice.

Speaking of Mary Magdalene reminds me of our daughter, who is named after Mary Magdalene. When Emily was pregnant for the first time, we chose our daughter's name about 4 months before she was born. We kept her name a secret to everyone, but at home, I was the obnoxious dad who talked all the time to my daughter in the womb. I'd lean down and say, "Hi Madeleine, it's your daddy." Every day—morning, noon, and night—calling her name before she was born. "Madeleine, when you're older we'll go get ice cream together all the time."

The most remarkable thing happened a few minutes *after* Madeleine was born. She's wailing because she just came into the world; nurses are doing what nurses do for newborns. She's wailing and then I lean down and softly said, "Hi Madeleine it's your daddy." And for just a few moments she stopped crying. She recognized my voice. I tried

that same move the first night she came home. And it didn't work all night long. But it was a good first moment.

Every day, tuned to the Shepherd's voice, spoken through the Word of God and prayer. The best internal defense we have against attacks on our faith.

The Sheepfold

The second defense is external: the sheepfold. The sheepfold itself is the main reason we have to do away with sentimental feelings of shepherding. In ancient Palestine, most shepherds tended their flocks in the wilderness, which was the domain of thieves, robbers, and predators. Shepherds had to be tough and alert in these rugged conditions. To protect his sheep in the wilderness, a shepherd built a stone enclosure with a single entrance, a gate. Oftentimes a shepherd might find a cave to form part of the enclosure, but still he built a wall and a gate against the cave. In his parable, Jesus mentions a gatekeeper of the sheepfold, who opens the door for the Shepherd's entry.

We often read the villains in this story as an allegory, but we don't do the same with other figures like the sheepfold or the gatekeeper. Yet our ancestors in faith interpret the sheepfold as an image of the Church. Christ not only protects us by his Word, he gives us his Church, he appoints his apostles to guard us from error and lead us into a right understanding and application of his Word.

Shepherds would build their ancient enclosures by stacking stones. Each stone stacked in this enclosure fits together to give us a strong defense. From earliest years the **apostles' teaching** built up the Church, the Holy Spirit leading the Church into unity and spiritual power around the Word of God. For the truth of the Gospel and the apostles' teaching, martyrs like Stephen died for the faith. The **blood of martyrs** built up the Church. **Apostles, bishops, and church fathers** led us into the beauty of the Scriptures, but they also help us see where we might read Scripture wrongly. "If we do not undo Scripture," St John Chrysostom said, "we shall not easily be conquered by our enemies." Christ constructed more stones for the sheepfold, leading the Church by the Holy Spirit into greater truth when the apostles' teaching was summarized in the **Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed** There is

no other god except one God in Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **The sacraments of baptism and holy communion** fortify us with the grace of Christ. The Lord built his sheepfold, his Church, to guard the holiness, the power, and the beauty of his Gospel. These stones have been cut to fit together. Remove one of those stones and you have a breach in the wall.

It's remarkable how sheep instinctively sense vulnerability to danger. James Rebanks is an actual shepherd living today. He's preserving the dying custom of tending sheep in Yorkshire, England. Rebanks shared an interesting observation about life among his sheep in the face of danger. In the midst of a heavy snowfall and high winds, older sheep instinctively seek shelter. Rebanks writes:

Mountain sheep have a sixth sense for the weather on their own territory. I find them under Scots pine trees, forty feet beneath the danger of wind and drifts. The oldest ewes will have led them here, and will stand stubbornly if the younger ewes try to lead them out to danger. The flock takes their cue from the elders. They know they are safe here, with tussock grass to chew on to keep them alive if the snow lasts for days. ⁴

It is not only the strength of the wall that defends us; our elders in faith have learned to withstand high winds in the wilderness. One of my elders in the faith warned me in my early 20s of fads that pass through the Church. "I've seen so many fads pass through the Church in lifetime," he said. "Stay with the ancient faith, once for all delivered to the saints."

Trust the faith of living elders who have been saints for decades. Seek the wisdom of our departed elders, our ancestors who suffered and died for the faith. This is what keeps the sheepfold strong amid the winds of fads and doctrine.

⁴ Rebanks, James. *The Shepherd's Life* (p. 191). Flatiron Books. Kindle Edition.

The Gate

The last defense is the strongest defense: the gate. The gate in an ancient sheepfold wasn't a door. It was a person. The shepherd *becomes* the gate at night, lying down in the entrance itself, the only opening in the sheepfold. He lays down his life for the sheep.

That visual gives a whole new meaning to another "I am" statement our Lord Jesus made. "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." There is no other entrance into the Lord's sheepfold except to enter through his death and resurrection. His death and his resurrection are the ultimate defense from the assaults of the Enemy.

I cherish the words of St Augustine here:

Keep hold of this: Whoever would enter the sheepfold, let him enter by the door, let him preach the true Christ. Not only let him preach the true Christ, but seek Christ's glory, not his own; for many, by seeking their own glory, have scattered Christ's sheep, instead of gathering them. For Christ the Lord is a low gateway: he who enters by this gateway must humble himself, that he may be able to enter with head unharmed. But he that does not humble himself, but exalts himself, wishes to climb over the wall; and he that climbs over the wall, is exalted only to fall. ⁵

Christ's humility, his suffering, his death, his resurrection are the greatest defenses we have in this life.

⁵ Philip Schaff, Ed., St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 7.

Conclusion

I have spoken about three defenses our Good Shepherd has given us. But make no mistake: the Good Shepherd doesn't live life in a defensive posture, hunkered in the bunker. Only half the day—the night hours—are spent in the sheepfold. When morning dawns, the Good Shepherd leads his sheep to pasture. And he goes before them.

That's why I think we read this lesson in Eastertide. The resurrection Christ goes before his disciples, preparing them for the mission he gives. You cannot join his mission without finding shelter in his sheepfold; you cannot remain in the sheepfold when the Good Shepherd leads you into the fields. For even then he calls us by name. And we follow him so that other sheep will hear his voice, enter the sheepfold that there may be one flock, one shepherd. Amen.