

Jesus: the Good Shepherd

One of the great mysteries of our faith is the Incarnation. As Christians we believe somehow God became a man. We don't claim to comprehend this; we only confess it by faith. And it is among the most critical pillars of our faith. Without it Christianity cannot hold together. And in terms of our series, *What's in a name*, the Incarnation is crucial for it is through the Incarnation that we have our relationship with God. Each of the names we are studying are pictures of our relationship with God through the experience of Christ. As it says in Hebrews, *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways. But in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son...the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being* (Heb 1:1-3). Or as one little boy expressed it, "Jesus is the best picture God ever had took!"

Saint Augustine expressed the Incarnation mystery this way. *Maker of the sun, he is made under the sun. In the Father he remains, from his mother he goes forth. Creator of heaven and earth, he was born on earth under heaven. Unspeakably wise, He is wisely speechless. Filling the world, he lies in a manger. Ruler of the stars, he nurses at his mother's bosom. He is both great in the nature of God and small in the form of a servant.* We believe the Lord of creation became a creature. Son of God became son of man. Ancient of Days became a new born. The creator of trees and rivers played in them. The Logos went to school!

God, as a child, learned the scriptures and surely a favorite passages must have been, like it has been for every generation of believers, David's shepherd psalm. Read it we me. *The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul: he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies: thou anoints my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my lfie: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

This was David's favorite picture of the relationship we are meant to have with God, a relationship like a shepherd has with his Sheep. The imagery of the divine shepherd was well known among the Jews. We see it in Psalm 95: 6-7. *Come let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. And for that reason the Jewish leaders must have been shocked if not scandalized when Jesus uses this image for his own relationship with his followers. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father --and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my*

voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life --only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father" (John 10:14-18).

It should not be surprising that the response to these words was so harsh. *At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?"* (John 10: 19.20) If Jesus was only a boy who grew up in Nazareth, their offense would be appropriate; but he was more than the son of Joseph and Mary; he was the incarnate Son of God who came into the world to show us the Father and the relationship the Father would have with us.

This shepherd-sheep relationship seems so tender and sweet. But I'm told by those who know sheep that they are very frustrating and maybe the dumbest of animals. My mother grew up with sheep and I asked her about her memories. Two stood out to her. Sheep stink and they're dumb. Apparently sheep are very easily influenced. They are very prone to wander off into danger. There is a story of a young teacher who began her teaching career in sheep country. Many of her students were the children of shepherds. One day, in math class, she asked, "If there are 10 sheep and one wanders off, how many are left?" One of the young boys answered "None." "What?" the teacher responded somewhat dismayed at the boy's poor math knowledge. "Son, 10 minus 1 does not equal 0!" "Teacher, you

may know math, but you don't know sheep." Isaiah apparently agreed with the boy's assessment of sheep. In a passage much less comforting than the 23rd Psalm, the prophet also describes our relationship with God as a shepherd and his sheep. *All we like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way* (Isaiah 53: 6). Then again, maybe the 23rd Psalm is not as sweet and serene as it sounds.

Underneath the seemingly gentle words of the shepherd's psalm there is implied a persistent struggle. Notice. *He makes me lie down in green pastures.* Why would the shepherd have to make us lie down? Perhaps because it is not our nature to rest, to be at peace. Like sheep we are easily panicked and find it difficult to relax. I don't know about you, but there are many nights, too many, when I wake up worrying about things. What is it that keeps you up at night? Jesus our shepherd wants us to lie down, to rest, to be at peace. He knows it is not easy for us. *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls* (Matthew 11:28). The Message translation of this verse indicates much of our lack of peace may be related to our religion. *Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I*

won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

The shepherd psalm goes on. *He leads me by still waters, he restores my soul.* Shepherd and theologian Phillip Keller writes that when sheep get thirsty they will drink from any water source they can find, many of which will be polluted with parasites and germs that lead to disease. We understand that don't we. We too seek to satisfy our thirst with sources that do not restore us. We need a shepherd to lead us to what is truly refreshing, truly satisfying or else we will satisfy ourselves to death. Again we hear the echo of this psalm in Isaiah's words, *Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread and your labor on what does not satisfy. Listen, listen to me and eat what is good and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me that your soul may live* (Isa 55:1-3).

This satisfaction and delight in life depends on our following the shepherd, on our decisions in life reflecting his divine guidance. And so the psalmist says, *He guides us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.* We so easily wander off those paths. Ever wonder why we need to be led down a "path." Paths are clearly worn, clearly marked. Generally the way we are supposed to go is pretty clear. Yet still we wander off and go astray. We are led away by desire, ours and

others. Desire is not always wrong but it is not automatically right. And when our desire leads us away from the path our shepherd would lead us to, then our desires can lead us to destruction. James says we have evil desires that give birth to sin and that sin grows in us and give birth to death. And yet still we often choose our desires over the clear righteous path. It seems for us, having a path is not enough, we need a relationship with the Shepherd we can count on to lead us the right way. The phrase “for his name’s sake” is easily overlooked. But it is rich in meaning. Our shepherd leads us in the right way because it is his nature to do so. His name is righteousness and holiness. He would never lead us wrong. And when we are in relationship with him, then being righteous, doing the right thing is no longer a matter of following rules but a matter of honoring the name of our Lord.

When I was attending the University of Oklahoma, I would frequently drive home on the weekend. In those days they were trying to save oil so the speed limit, on the Interstate, was reduced to 55 mph! I don’t know about you, but I have a hard time keeping it under the double nickel. At the time it helped that I was driving a little Mazda. It topped out at about 70. But if I wasn’t careful, I’d soon be breezing along at 65-70. And really, it didn’t bother me all that much. After all, I’m not being reckless; I’d never drive over 80. As a matter of fact, if everybody drove like me, we’d all be safe enough. Somehow amidst such powerful rationalizations, the fact that 55 is the law never registered. Oh, it keeps me from

going 75 or more perhaps, but it rarely slows me down to 55. But as long as I'm restraining myself somewhat and resisting the urge to really speed, I feel I'm a good law-abiding citizen. Lots of folks speed more than me! But on one of my trips home, as I was saying goodbye to my folks, just as I hopped into the car, my dad said, "don't speed." That bugged me! On the way back every time that little needle inched by the 55, I started feeling bad. Usually, if I keep it on 60 all the way, I considered myself to be a saint. This time was different. Why?! That's not too hard to figure, is it? The law doesn't have much power in our lives. Oh, it may restrain us a bit, but usually we find ourselves living on the border between right and wrong. But when the law, *Do Not Speed*, becomes the word of someone we love, our motivation changes. When my father asked me not to speed, that changed things. Speeding now was not simply breaking the law; it was breaking a relationship. We need more than a path. We need a shepherd.

Even though I walk in the shadows... he is with me. Here is why this psalm is read so often at funerals, as we gather around the grave literally in the shadow of death. But death is not the only shadow we walk in. We travel through the shadows of disease, the blackness of failure, murky, dark fears of all kinds. But shadows are not nearly so frightening with the shepherd standing beside us. It's not just that our shepherd is there, it is that he has been there, he understands. In fact, my own experience is that the closest moments we have with our Shepherd are

actually the shadow moments. Years ago working at the Training Work in Houston I went through what I look back on now as a kind of depression. Several things brought it on, but in the midst of it I remember one night just hanging out with some students. My job was to counsel and facilitate the needs of these students while they were studying in Houston. That night one student publically criticized me very harshly for something I had not done. She was livid and her accusations had no merit or any basis in fact. Don't get me wrong. If she needed a reason to criticize me, there would have been more than enough available. But these accusations she was making were untrue, unfair and unkind.

I guess it was just the last of several discouraging things that had happened and I just felt like giving up. My spirit was broken. I had no desire to defend myself or do anything really. I just stood there feeling lower and lower; lower than I can ever remember feeling. In that moment I heard a voice. You know me. I don't hear voices. That's not my religious style. But in that moment I did hear a voice, the voice of my Lord. His presence seemed more real to me than ever before. And what he said brought such a peace that later one student came up to me and asked, what happened? What do you mean? I asked. He said, "Right in the middle of that harangue when it looked like you were just going to wilt away, you just changed. You suddenly looked incredibly peaceful." I told him the words I had heard in that moment that seemed to come from Jesus himself. "I know how

you feel.” As if to say, I know what it is like to be publically humiliated, unfairly accused. I know what it is like to want to give up. And as I heard that word from my Lord I immediately realized something. In that moment I knew, just a little, how he felt. I had experienced just a hint of the suffering, the rejection my Lord willingly endured for me. And in that moment I felt a wonderful closeness with my shepherd, a closeness that is perhaps uniquely reserved for when we walk in the shadows. Somewhere I came across this poem that says it well I think.

*Sometimes we'll be in shadows because we've stepped astray,
Sometimes we'll be in shadows because He's led that way.
Whichever reason we are distressed, whether clear or yet unknown
With one truth we are forever blessed, we know we are not alone.*

The psalm continues. *Your rod and your staff they comfort me.* I understand the rod was a weapon the shepherd used to protect the sheep from predators and sometimes even from the sheep themselves with a good knock on the head. The staff on the other hand was a more gentle tool to nudge and guide the sheep. Both are comforting in their own way. We prefer the gentle nudge; sometimes we need a knock in head. Jesus takes no delight in disciplining us, but also no delight in watching us self destruct. As it is often said, he loves us just as we are, but he loves us too much to leave us that way!

He prepares a table before us in presence of our enemies. One thing a shepherd does for his sheep is to go ahead of them to find new pastures, new

“tableland.” He then prepares the field, pulling up any poison weed since the sheep are too stupid not to eat it. As they eat he watches for danger, ever present predators. I’m told that Ireland may be the only place in the world where sheep have no predators, no coyotes, wolves or big cats at all. Such is not the case for most sheep in most places. Nor is it the case for us; we never know what malevolence lies in wait for us in this life. What we do know is our shepherd’s already been there, ahead of us, preparing the way. That’s a comforting thought that our shepherd is not only with us now, but is in our future. preparing it for us.

He anoints my head with oil, my cup overflows. Sheep are often wounded, injured and the healing process includes anointing with oil. It’s said shepherds know their sheep by their wounds. How does the shepherd know you? What wounds has he gently anointed for you? We often think of our sins, our failures as repulsing to God, and in one sense that is true. But it is also true that he knows us by them, he draws nearest to us through them. This is the mystery of the gospel of grace. In our weakness we are strong, not because weakness is a good thing but because it is often in our weakness we feel the need, even more, the desire to be anointed by the shepherd. And here is the good news of the shepherd–sheep relationship. It is not just our wounds that he anoints; our whole life is anointed. Of all the relationships we might know in this world, this is the most blessed.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house

of the Lord forever. This is the blessed relationship Jesus came to offer to all of us, to be our Shepherd, for us to be the flock under his care.

He says to us, “I am a good shepherd. I know you by name, I want you to know me, my voice. I am not merely a hired hand who tends a flock. I want to lead you and care for you. I will not abandon you when the wolf comes. I will lay down my life for you; I already have.” And if we say yes to this relationship, then we will know blessedness in this life and in the life to come, that spiritual Ireland where every pasture is green, all predators have been vanquished and sheep enjoy the constant care and precious presence of their Shepherd. Or as John writes in the Revelation. *For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water.* “*And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes* (Revelation 7:17).

This Lamb who even now sits on the throne of glory invites us to be the flock under his care. He offers to be not just a glorious Savior, but also a Gentle Shepherd. I love the song we are about to sing; it describes what should be our response to this offer from Jesus. *Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us, for we need you to help us find our way. Gentle Shepherd come and feed us for we need your strength from day to day. There’s no other we can turn to, who can help us face another day. Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us, for we need you to help us find our way.* May these words always describe our relationship with our Lord.