

Karen Hollis | April 4, 2021

Psalm 23 | John 10:11-18

Good Shepherd Sunday

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us today, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen

This is Good Shepherd Sunday, where we consider this image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd . . . in the metaphor we become the sheep. While I'm not interested in drawing tight comparisons between sheep and us – in no way do I have time this morning to unpack all of that – it does strike me that we call ourselves “followers of Jesus,” and so followers of the Good Shepherd. In fact, many people prefer the term “follower of Jesus” to Christian . . . it does have far less baggage. As a follower of Jesus, I wonder, who is the Jesus you follow? I imagine our images and perceptions of Jesus differ. I have a relationship with a couple of different Jesuses. There's the Jesus of scripture. He's a figure I observe in the context of stories. I imagine him meeting people face to face, healing, preaching, exposing evil, challenging Jewish leaders. Then there is the Jesus who appears to me in a mystical way. Often uninvited, yet still welcome, this Jesus shows up unexpectedly while I'm in prayer . . . he challenges me to be courageous in my life. Who is the Jesus you follow? What are his qualities? What are the stories about him or the stories he tells that grab your attention? What is it about him that compels you to follow?

In today's story, Jesus has something to say about who he is and he uses the term shepherd to describe himself, the Good Shepherd. When I hear this term I first think of a Sunday School image that is pretty sanitized. Pleasant, happy, benign; it's the goodness expressed in Psalm 23 – surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life; it's seeing the sheep happily munching away in the Gray's field as we drive by. Most of us don't stop at the Gray farm for feeding time or lambing time, and we aren't there when difficult decisions need to be made. We rely on stories and images to help us understand the intimate relationship between sheep and shepherd, the relationship of trust that is built, and how critical that trust is at times to things like life and death.

But the word Good used in John's gospel actually means something completely different. The Good Shepherd isn't a benign or pleasant figure, rather he is “just as one ought to be.” This shepherd is

experienced on the land, plans ahead and problem solves, is fierce when he needs to be, and his very presence is comforting and puts the sheep at ease. The primary word that comes up in translation is actually beautiful . . . but also eminent . . . there's a depth to the beauty, like the landscape on Iona; there's something else there that's calling to us, just beyond our reach. It's the beauty of a newborn baby; they have a presence that is difficult to articulate. This word is trying to describe a purity and innocence combined with an authenticity that reveals a complete and praiseworthy competence.

The Good Shepherd is all of these things because in his presence we feel like the stuff of life is manageable. We so often find ourselves in the wilderness, feeling alone, in the darkness, unsure where the resources are or who we can trust. But when the Good Shepherd is there with you, perhaps your mind is quiet enough to take the next right step, perhaps you remember an important detail, perhaps you find some perspective or trust that he is present and active in all of creation. The Good Shepherd not only leads us in all the ways a shepherd ought to, he also helps us in all the moments we connect with him or call on his help, to be the best and fullest versions of ourselves we can. This is Jesus' own understanding of his role in our lives and his part in the unfolding of God's creation. Thanks be to God for the Good Shepherd may his name be praised! Amen.