

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me” (John 10.14)

Perhaps in the time before every cell phone had maps, you have gotten dreadfully lost somewhere. Perhaps there was nobody around for you to ask for directions, and no signs around that could point you in the right direction. Perhaps you’ve felt this same “lostness” inside you when you’ve experienced some sort of tragedy in your life – the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, a betrayal of trust, or a crisis of faith. I think it’s safe to say most of us have been there at least once, if not everyone. The feeling of being lost is such a normal place we humans can end up in. What a great comfort, then, are the words the Lord God tells the prophet Ezekiel: *“For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness”* (Ezek. 34:11-12).

This week, we have what we call “Good Shepherd Sunday”, perhaps for obvious reasons by now. In case you missed it, each of our three lessons talks about Good Shepherds – the kind that care for their flocks. This image of the Good Shepherd, being one of Jesus’ great “I am” statements from the Gospel of John, is one of the oldest depictions of Jesus in Christian Art. In the Catacombs of Rome, which are dozens of underground burial places for hundreds of Christians and non-Christians alike, the Good Shepherd is the most commonly found Christian symbol at a time when overt Christian art was still illegal. Only the Christians knew its exact symbolism, and they adorned their burial places with these images of Jesus.

We know that herd livestock have been important to the history of the people of Israel from accounts in the Old Testament of the Patriarchs moving their herds, or that the family of Joseph were shepherds and were bringing their flocks with them into Egypt. King David, himself, was a shepherd before he was chosen to be the king (1 Sam. 16:11). And, of course, we have Psalm 23, which famously announces “The Lord is my Shepherd”. In the New Testament, the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew refers to Jesus as the promised “...ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” And we know from the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke that Shepherds were the first witnesses to the Good News of the birth of Christ (Luke 2:8ff). Shepherds, and imagery of sheep, were something relatively known to the people of Israel, so the fact that Jesus posited himself as a “Good Shepherd”, and the associated story, would have made sense to Jesus’ listeners, even if they didn’t grasp *all* that he was saying.

For Jesus was the good shepherd who *gives his life for the sheep*. He loves his sheep so much that he’d die so they can live. Where have we heard that message before? Just a few short weeks ago at Easter! Jesus knows his sheep, and his sheep know and trust him.

We heard in the Old Testament lesson from the prophet Ezekiel that the Lord God seeks out his sheep that are lost. “I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak...” (Ezek. 34:16). He will bring them to the good grazing land, and sit them down in their rich pastures. Here, the Lord is referring especially to his people Israel, that he will feed his sheep (the people) in their land of Israel which he has given to them. And, later, he says, “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd” (Ezek. 34:23). David, the shepherd boy who became king of Israel, and the ancestor of Jesus through his father Joseph’s house.

Jesus, the heir of King David, takes this guardianship a step further. In Luke 15, in the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus asks his followers, “which of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine... and go after the one that is lost, until

he finds it?... Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:4,7). Jesus deeply cares about his flock, and rejoices when the lost has been found, after he seeks them out. And Jesus compares his sheep to sinners and followers. In the verses prior to our gospel reading today, Jesus says, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.”* And then later he says, *“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd”* (John 10:7-9, 16).

Rejoicing over the one found sheep, Jesus is the door of the sheep, and he has other sheep not of this fold, whom he must find to make one flock under one shepherd. Jesus may have been talking about sheep, but he wasn't *talking* about sheep. No, he was talking about the Kingdom of God and those who have not yet been found and saved: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice”. This shows an expansion to what God told Ezekiel: the focus was no longer only on the people of Israel. Instead, he is now talking about what we know to be the Church, the body of Christ, of which he is the head, the overseer, the shepherd. He seeks out those who do not yet believe, and any of his sheep who go astray are sought until they are found. He is not like those who are hired, who will take their money and flee at the first sign of trouble. No, because Jesus loves his sheep and would die for them, he is the one who truly cares when nobody else would.

Saint Augustine says that it is the Holy Spirit who is the gatekeeper who lets in the sheep, for Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as he who “will teach you all truth [in John 16]. What is the gate? Christ. What is Christ? The truth. Who opens the gate if not the one who teaches all truth?”¹ This is consistent with what we understand about the Holy Spirit as always at work to bring people to faith or to rekindle their faith. It is the Holy Spirit who helps to find the sheep that are missing from the fold.

For St. Augustine, we are left with a paradox: that Jesus is both sheep and shepherd. He is both the lamb that was led to the slaughter, and the shepherd who tends the flock. He was both the sheep and the one who laid down his life for the sheep. But he points out that the messaging is consistent.² The call in both Ezekiel by the Lord God, and in John by Jesus is the same message: the *good* shepherd calls the sheep back to the fold, and if they don't answer, he goes to find them. Thanks be to God that even when we are led astray or eaten by the wolves, we are being pursued by the Spirit to be returned to our Good Shepherd, the head of the body. By his death and resurrection, we know that the shepherd truly did die for his sheep, and now that he has risen again, we are assured of his protection.

In the moments in our lives of despair, of lostness, of fear, or of crisis, we can be assured of the presence of God. If we reject him, he is nonetheless pursuing us to return us to the flock. If we seem alone, we can be assured that we are being sought. If we are hurt, we will be carried back in his loving arms. He has died for the sheep and will continue to die for the sheep. At the final day, as the book of Revelation tells us, *“Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. 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).

Thanks be to God for our redeemer and great shepherd, our Risen Saviour Christ.

¹ St. Augustine of Hippo, “Homily 46” on the Gospel of John.

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