

Abundant Life

John 10:1-10

How is or was your mother like a shepherd?

One of the beloved images of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is that of the attentive shepherd. Deep in the tradition is this iconic understanding that God will intimately shepherd the people. Whether through the shepherd king, David, or the promised Messiah, who would "gather the lambs with his arm," and "gently lead those that are with young" ([Isa. 40:11 KJV](#)), God would provide protection and identity for God's own. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who gives abundant life to the sheep.

Just before your reading, Jesus had a confrontation with the Pharisees and our passage draws a sharp contrast between the healing action of Jesus on behalf of the man born blind and that of the religious leaders who reject the blind man's testimony about Jesus, label him a born sinner, and ultimately "drive him out" ([9:34](#)). The man whose sight is restored ends up worshiping Jesus as "Lord" ([9:38](#)), while the Pharisees themselves are judged to be "blind" ([9:40-41](#)). This contrast between Jesus and the faithless religious leaders continues in our text.

The image of the shepherd as a symbol of leadership has strong roots in the Bible and was also a familiar metaphor in Greco-Roman literature. God is depicted as the shepherd of Israel in a number of Old Testament passages, perhaps most memorably in [Psalm 23](#), where there is the note of intimacy and protection: "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want". David is also celebrated as the ideal shepherd king (see [1 Sam. 16:6-13](#)). However, no passage is more important than [Ezekiel 34:1-31](#), which invokes the notion of God as shepherd of Israel, portrays the people as "sheep" to be led and protected, sharply critiques the leaders as false shepherds who harm the sheep, and praises David as the true shepherd who will care for God's sheep. This traditional

imagery inspires John's portrayal of Jesus as the "good shepherd" (v. 11) who, brings them protection, guidance, and abundant life.

The passage begins with an "amen" or "Very truly, I tell you" saying showing the contrast between the shepherd who enters the sheepfold by the gate and the "thief" and "bandit" (v. 1) who climb in another way. In traditional agrarian societies, then and now, an enclosure for the sheep would be constructed of a stone wall adjacent to the house, perhaps topped by branches of thorns to discourage climbing. There would be one gate or entrance, usually able to be locked shut to prevent anyone coming in to steal the sheep. Thievery was common and caused a devastating loss, since sheep were a source of food (meat and milk) and clothing and a major source of barter for other necessary goods.

The situation imagined here is that there is also a "gatekeeper" (v. 3) who guards the entrance, particularly at night. This implies that the sheepfold was sufficiently large to justify a hired hand as a gatekeeper, perhaps a place where several families kept their herds. The gatekeeper recognizes the true shepherd and allows him in. The sheep too recognize their shepherd by knowing his voice. Ancient and current experience in traditional societies confirms that the shepherd often knows each sheep by name, and they in turn recognize his distinctive call. In contrast to Western practice, where the shepherd follows the herd, in the Middle East one can still see shepherds walking out in front of their herd, repeatedly calling to them to keep them together. In our text the true shepherd leads his flock out of the sheepfold to pasture.

This segment closes by noting that Jesus' opponents "did not understand" the "figure of speech" Jesus used (v. 6). For those open to Jesus' word, however, the meaning is clear. Jesus is a true shepherd, not only in the spirit of David, but reflective of God's own providential love. Jesus' relationship with his disciples is one of intimacy and trust. They listen to his voice and recognize him. **Donald Senior** Jesus is the one whom the sheep will follow because of his tender knowledge of each of them, calling them by

name. He is the one whose sole purpose is to ensure the safety of the flock. He is the one willing to lay down his life that abundant life might be possible for his flock. Not only is he the shepherd; he is also the gate through whom persons enter, becoming members of God's own people. He is the way by which persons receive salvation, and no one should attempt to bypass this point of entry.

The role of the shepherd is to lead the sheep, providing protection, freedom from fear, and sustenance. Jesus assures his followers, "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" (v. 9). Unlike those who steal, kill, and destroy, this trustworthy shepherd offers abundant life. **Molly T. Marshall**

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus claims to provide the critical elements of abundant life: water (4:14), bread of life (6:35), light of the world (9:5), and here, shelter in the form of a sheepfold. Psalm 23: the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. There are good, green grass and still waters, but it is the presence of the shepherd that makes the field safe and nourishing.

Part of the mystery of faith and the riddle of the discourse is the presence of danger, even while in the sheepfold and the fields of good, green grass. There are strangers, thieves, and bandits; the flock will even cross through the "valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4 KJV). The sheep know to whom they belong; they respond to the call of their name. They are comforted by the voice and presence of the shepherd, even when there is danger and confusion.

As the blossoms of the Easter lilies fade, sometimes it is hard to see and understand, but we are invited to continue to embrace the riddle of faith: by dying, the shepherd provided abundant life. **Shannon Michael Pater**

Today, let us follow the Good Shepherd. Let us study the Bible so that we can recognize His voice. Let us live the abundant life in him. Let us pursue a purposeful vocation that serves the common good. Let us participate in a life-giving worship community. Let us delight in life-sustaining relationships. Let us have a sense of

security in Christ no matter what comes. The abundant life is ours for the receiving by following the one that is the life-giver.

Psalm 118:19-20

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.
²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.

Psalm 23: The Divine Shepherd

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
³ he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.
⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely ^[e] goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

Jesus said: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus is the gate, the way to God's redemptive love, the one who satisfies our human yearning. Will you accept Him as your Shepherd, your Savior and your Lord?

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