

Who is my Shepherd?

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My cell phone is my shepherd I shall not want for hot takes, and updates, and instant gratification. It leads me to cool websites. It refreshes my screen.

Sometimes we need new metaphors. When the old ones get spiritualized or watered down, or when we've forgotten what they mean.

Today our Scriptures put us among shepherds and sheep, images that are both very familiar and quite foreign. Familiar because we've taken that image of the Good Shepherd and sentimentalized it into something we all recognize. The picture of an Arian Jesus seated in a lovely meadow while around him sheep will safely graze, is actually a really modern idea, which you can find hanging in churches and depicted on religious greeting cards.

But that's not really what the image of the shepherd in the Scriptures meant.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, shepherds are metaphors for royalty – the ultimate King being God. And the sheep are the people, Israel. And that flock rarely gets to hang out in green pastures and lie down by still waters in the hilly, dusty, thirsty Middle East. Instead they are often on the move, and regularly are displaced by famine and war. Scripture scholars say that the 23rd Psalm is a prayer about Israel being led out of exile. That's where the image gets a little foreign to us in our Philadelphia parish.

We don't have kings. We do not move in caravans of refugees. We do not need a guide to show us to water or rest or food, though we're not above hiring a personal trainer or coach. We don't really see ourselves as sheep. We don't tend to think in terms of shepherds.

But there is something that our ancient ancestors got right about human nature. We are like sheep. It doesn't matter how independent we think we are. We are probably more interdependent than ever. We do travel in herds – just look at our highways. And we do follow.

The Hebrew scriptures understand how vulnerable sheep can be, and they have a lot to say about following the right shepherd. Jesus does as well.

A shepherd is someone who takes the sheep where the shepherd wants them to go. A Good Shepherd will be looking out for the wellbeing of the sheep. The other kind does not. So it matters to Israel who is shepherding it. And if it's not ultimately God, then Israel is in big trouble.

In the Gospel from John , Jesus is also speaking to Israel, to his people, and addressing their shepherds. They shouldn't have trouble recognizing the messiah, God's anointed, if they are truly allowing God to shepherd them. Jesus could probably say the same thing about us, on many days. So we must not get caught in a very old trap that takes the heat off of us and creates an enemy to put it on. That's why we might need to change the metaphor a bit to see where we might have a tendency to go astray, who or what is shepherd us today. That's the question.

My phone is my shepherd; sports are my shepherd, social media, my school, team or work, my appetite.

These all should be benign things – tools, technologies, things that serve us. But they become our shepherds when they take us where they want us to go. In the end they decide. And given our world right now, I'm not sure that they have green pastures and still waters in mind for us. We are exhausted by them, and addicted to them, our eyes are strained, our calendars overbooked, our credit lines over extended, and violence is never far from us. We are not our own. And this often leads us to doubt that God would ever intervene.

This is what happens when we are left to our own... devices. They know our voices and we know theirs -- their ringtones and buzzes and texts, Siri, Cortana, GPS. We know the tone of their voices, their schedules for us, their veiled threats, the fear they elicit lest we fall behind or lose our place in line for better things.

But I do not think that any of these things will really walk with us through the dark valley. Or set a table for us in the face of danger, or anoint and protect us. And that's wise biblical test of a Good Shepherd. In my life there's only one who has ever done that for me.

If we look closely at the metaphorical language of the 23rd psalm and the 10th chapter of John we are told where God desires to shepherd us. God desires to shepherd us away from grasping want and toward the very desires of our tired and thirsty soul. God shepherds us, not from the dark valleys in our lives, but from our fear of them. Death has no sting, our enemies have no power over us. We are shepherded toward goodness and mercy and the presence of God. Jesus puts it simply – through his shepherding, God and God's people know one another, listen to one another and cannot be separated from one another. They are one.

If that's what we want from a shepherd, then we need only stop following these false shepherds, right? Just turn them off. Log out. Quit. Start writing letters again. Using rotary phones.

But it's not always as easy as that – putting the false shepherds down, even just returning them to their right uses, can be incredibly counter cultural. I knew a family in State College whose children were immensely talented athletes. One year they put the teams who were recruiting them on notice that they would not be available on Sunday mornings, which they had reserved for family and church. That may be one of the most courageous acts I ever saw performed in the town where the Nittany lions held sway.

But they had the right idea. To really disempower these kinds of shepherds can take a whole different kind of life practice. That's why Israel valued its community and its worship so much. That's why we do as well. When we come here we come to a place where other shepherds are simply not allowed in. So we silence our cell phones here and we do not check our email or twitter feed or facebook posts; We do not plug in our earphones and listen to our own play list (because given this music – how could we?) ; we do not schedule school or work or sports for this time if we can possibly avoid it; we do not bring in our drug of choice. This is a safe space with a different shepherd.

To get the hang of this shepherd, we practice tuning into God's word, attending to God's voice, experiencing the presence of Christ in one another. We are led and fed and touched and sent by God who is creator and Christ and Spirit.

And every time we leave this place we have a choice to make, which shepherd do we fall into line behind? If it is God, then our devices and our habits return to being tools that we can easily pick up and put down. We wisely know their danger

and our weakness. We have the freedom of imagination to fill the space they tend to take up with something else – prayer, service, justice, loving awareness, relationships.

Every time we leave this place, we have another choice to make – what kind of flock are we? And if we're God's flock, God's sheep – what does that entail? Shepherds didn't keep sheep as a hobby, for the sheer joy of moving them from one place to another. Sheep had a purpose then and now. For Israel they helped meet the needs for food and drink and warmth and ritual. To be the flock of God also has a purpose in the world, as God seeks to protect and feed it and connect with it.

We who follow in the Easter footsteps of Jesus must remember that God meets us not only as Shepherd but as lamb. To be guided by this God is to be guided in a life that is everlasting, held in a grasp out of which we cannot be plucked. It is to be called by name and given purpose.

All other shepherds pale in comparison.

Amen.