

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, April 30, 2023

4 Easter, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

[Acts 2:42-47](#)

[1 Peter 2:19-25](#)

[John 10:1-10](#)

[Psalm 23](#)

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On this fourth Sunday in Easter season when we hear Jesus speak of himself as the Good Shepherd I always think about our Good Shepherd window behind the altar. It's probably the most prominent image in our church: Jesus in flowing red and blue robes, surrounded by his sheep, and tenderly cradling one of them, the smallest, perhaps the one that has gone missing as in one of the parables Jesus tells elsewhere in the gospels.

I admit I sometimes find it a little distracting to see Jesus' skin paper-white and his clearly European features and his flowing straight sandy hair. We do tend to make Jesus in our own image and I know that in the 1890s or so when this window was made this Anglo-Saxon Jesus seemed to be the natural choice to the people who gathered to worship in this place at that time. Yet I still find much to love in this window, much to mesmerize me about the shimmering jewel-like hues of blue in the sky and in Jesus' robe, the dazzling greens and purples.

Hanging above Jesus and his flock are the protective, shady, fruitful branches of a tree; perhaps it echoes the image of the tree of life. All around are clusters of rich grapes, suggesting not only the bounty of nature but also the fruit of the vine that Jesus will give his people as the living drink that is himself.

Sometimes this fourth Sunday in Easter season is called Good Shepherd Sunday because of the readings we hear. Today we hear Jesus speak of himself as a shepherd, in terms drawn in part from the psalm we sang also today, everyone's favorite psalm, the 23rd; a psalm traditionally said to have been written by David, the greatest king of Israel, who himself as a young boy had been a shepherd, guarding his sheep from lions and bears, guiding them safely out to pasture and back into the sheepfold.

Today in our passage from John's gospel Jesus boldly and wildly mixes metaphors, as he often does. Jesus is the shepherd, the one who calls his sheep and they know his voice. And yet in the next breath Jesus is also the gate, the passage through which the sheep come in and go out and find pasture.

Sometimes commentators and preachers get a little nervous about mixed metaphors and feel the need to try to resolve them. There's a sermon tidbit that floats around out there that suggests that the reason Jesus speaks about himself as both the shepherd and also the gate is that back in the old days sheepfolds didn't have gates and so the shepherd himself would lie across the opening at night to keep the sheep in. So the shepherd is the gate, get it!? It's an ingenious idea, but I'm pretty sure it's one of those urban legends that some bright preacher came up with and somehow spread until people thought it was genuine ancient lore.

For one thing, it seems a pretty insecure way to keep your sheep in. Did ancient shepherds really never roll over in their sleep? But the other reason I'm not wild about this particular explanation is that it suggests that the reason Jesus calls himself the gate is about guarding the sheep, protecting them, keeping them safely inside their sheep pen. But in the actual text of our scripture passage Jesus doesn't seem to be fixated on keeping the sheep inside. He says the gate is for going in *and* coming out. "Whoever enters by me will be saved," Jesus says, "and will come in *and go out and find pasture.*" The pasture—the food—the abundant life is found not inside the fold but outside, outside the protective walls, outside the shelter of safety. Jesus' promise to his sheep is a double one. Yes, there will be times of security and rest. But there will also be times to go out, into the unknown territory where the green grass is to be found and also the dark places, where lions and bears may roam. And the promise here is not that we won't go there, but that the shepherd will go with us, that he will protect us—"your rod and your staff, they comfort me"; that we will be fed for our journey—"you spread a table before me even in the presence of my enemies"; and that even if one of us should be lost, the good shepherd will never rest and will scour the countryside until we are back on his shoulders and brought safely home.

But there is still more to this image of the shepherd and his sheep. David was a shepherd, first literally, then figuratively as the legendary good king who cares for the people. God is a shepherd, to the people of Israel in the Hebrew scriptures, and also through grace to us who are not part of God's first chosen people and yet have been grafted into God's people through Jesus. And Jesus is a shepherd, but not a shepherd only.

“Behold the Lamb of God,” says John the Baptist at the beginning of this Gospel of John. And at the end of the Gospel of John Jesus will be slain on the day of Preparation, the day the Passover lambs are being sacrificed, which is to say that Jesus is the great Paschal lamb, the one who takes away the sin of the world. In the book of Revelation we are shown a vision of Jesus in the heavenly throne room standing in the form of a Lamb, a Lamb that has been slain and yet is alive.

And so we have a shepherd who is himself one of the sheep, the greatest mixed metaphor of them all; God become one of us, to live as one of us, to share our joys and sorrows, to undergo suffering with us, and to open up for us a way to new and unexpected life. Lamb, shepherd, gate, living water, bread of life, true vine, light of the world, our way, our truth, our life.