

## “Images of Jesus: I am the Good Shepherd”

Mary Henderson Bowman

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MEDITATION: Images of Jesus: “I am the Good Shepherd” - Mary Henderson Bowman - 4-28-24 (Ezekiel 34: 2a-6, 11-16a, 31; John 10:11-18)

There are good shepherds, and there are bad shepherds.

In our Old Testament reading, God highlights this understanding by accusing the spiritual leaders of the day of failing to care for God’s people.

Instead, the sheep are scattered. They are lost. They need a good shepherd.

Now - it has to be said that sheep are quite a challenging animal to care for.

And, of course, in talking about sheep we have to acknowledge that we also talking metaphorically about ourselves — the sheep of God’s own pasture.

We may not like hearing that . . .

Sheep are incredibly vulnerable creatures.<sup>1</sup>

They have no sharp teeth and no sharp claws to protect themselves.

Sheep are prone to wandering off to look for food and to check out their environment.

Sheep are easily provoked and disturbed by other sheep.<sup>2</sup>

And they prone to unease with a new people or new environments.

They are prone to panic and to scatter when storms come up or predators are on the prowl.

Knowing the qualities of sheep, is it any wonder that shepherding is a serious business?

The scholar William Barclay writes: A shepherd is never off duty. The sheep have to be watched constantly — both because of their tendency to wander off and because of the threat of predators and thieves. The shepherd’s job was constant and dangerous.

“Constant vigilance, fearless courage, patient love for [the] flock, were the necessary characteristics of the shepherd.”<sup>3</sup>

For a good shepherd it becomes second nature [for the shepherd] to think of the sheep before he or she thinks of themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Those who have spent time with shepherds know that the good shepherds stay with their sheep no matter what — even at the risk of their own death.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, “Sheep, Shepherd,” 782.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 90.

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John - Volume 2*, 53.

<sup>4</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John - Volume 2*, 61.

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Many shepherds bear the marks of snake bites, and teeth marks from wild animals and scars from the weapons of thieves. Every shepherd knows at least one shepherd who has died at the hands of robbers or predators.

Why? Because they love them.

One of my seminary professors, Tim Laniak, spent a sabbatical year among the shepherds of the Middle East. He was interested in what he could learn from actual shepherds about leadership and the care of others.

Tim wrote of a conversation he had with a Jordanian shepherd Abu-Jamal about what makes a good shepherd.

Abu-Jamal said “you have to have the heart for it.” You have to care for the sheep.

Abu-Jamal went on to express his personal grief that his own sons did not have the heart for the work and that he would have to sell his flock to someone else because he could never leave his sheep with someone who wouldn’t care for them.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of God, God has a Son who has a heart for shepherding the lost sheep of Israel and of the larger flock . . .

He knows each of us by name and tends to us and comes for the lost.

We watched as He cared for the sick, strengthen the weak, and found the lost.

Jesus loves the sheep as the Father and the Son love each other . . .

In our New Testament reading, Jesus also talks about a good shepherd knowing his or her sheep.

In the world of shepherding, each sheep is named and known.

The whole flock is checked at the end of every day to be sure that none are lost and to insure that they are not sick or injured.

It is true that the shepherd knows all of the sheep by name — names that have been given to the sheep by the shepherd.

As Dr. Laniak wrote, “Once you begin to fathom how many times an animal may have been counted, checked, carried, nursed back to health, rescued, protected, milked, and shorn, it dawns on you why the [shepherds] always say ‘[the sheep] are family.’”<sup>6</sup>

At the center of many shepherding stories are the stories of the shepherds saving the lost and pulling back together a flock that has scattered.

Jesus Himself spoke of the shepherd who would leave the 99 — I like to think in good care — to pursue the one that was lost

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 30-31.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

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Dr. Laniak shared a story of two Syrian brothers who had to search through the night until they finally discovered the trail of their two missing sheep. They told of how when they came back to their village, their father was out waiting for them and called to them, eager for news — ‘Have you found them?’ The answer floated back to the father” ‘saved, both saved.’ There was great rejoicing that day in the family and it is a story they never tire of telling or of hearing.<sup>7</sup>

As citizens of Charlotte, we likely don’t know about shepherding first hand and yet the metaphor of the Good Shepherd is still a powerful one.

In a world of over 6 billion people, there is power in being seen, in being known, in being cared for.

As human beings who experience the storms of life, it is easy to scatter from community and care.

We can feel lost when relationships shift or bosses change. We can feel lost when illness or death comes to ourselves or to those we love.

It is easy for us to become unsettled like the sheep.

When we are lost it is important to remember that we have a Good Shepherd who has His eye on us. Last week, our Old Testament reading was Psalm 23 where we heard about the shepherd who chases us with love and compassion, like the two brothers hunting their sheep through the night.

I also think we have a responsibility as fellow sheep.

I think the Good Shepherd calls us to come along and also find and care for the lost.

When we know the Good Shepherd, we too begin to notice who has been scattered and who seems lost.

And for any of us who have been lost, it is not an agenda that we need.

It is not advice that we need. It is not a prescriptive approach.

We simply need to be loved, to see that someone has noticed that we are struggling, to see that there is still room for us in the flock.

There are lost sheep in our church flock and in our larger human flock.

May we begin to cultivate an eye to care for them..

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 79.