

The Shepherd, The Flock, The Voice, The Arms

H. Stephen Shoemaker

May 26, 2019

John 10:11, 14-16,27-30

One of the favorite pictures of Jesus in classrooms at church as I grew up was Jesus tending sheep, Jesus the Good Shepherd.

I had a deacon in one of my churches, a brilliant physician, who did not like the minister's title of "pastor", because that implied that he and the other parishioners were sheep! Dumb sheep. I do not know why sheep are considered among the dumbest of animals—some of you out there by experience may have a different opinion. But have you ever seen trained sheep at a circus?

Nevertheless, the image of God as a shepherd is a beloved one, as is Jesus the Good Shepherd. So let us take another look. Our title: The Shepherd, The Flock, The Voice, The Arms.

I

First the shepherd. The 23rd Psalm may be the most beloved of all passages of scripture. Here God is depicted as the faithful, loving shepherd. The only real

live shepherd I've ever seen was in Israel. She was a girl! I watched as she watched over her sheep, squatting down on her haunches. When a sheep began to wander away from the flock, she'd pick up a rock and rifle it just outside of the sheep to turn it back to her flock, like a major league catcher rifling a throw to first base or third base. I was impressed.

In the 23rd Psalm God the shepherd cares for us, feeds us, leads us, and protects us. And it ends with these sublime words: "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." A Scottish preacher once summed up the parable of the prodigal son with these three perfect phrases: Sick of Home; Homesick; Home. Our longing for God is our longing for home.

II

Jesus adopts this imagery in John 10. It is the imagery of salvation and of eternal life. "I am the Good Shepherd."

Jesus describes the good shepherd who loves the sheep, calls them by voice and protects them. This is in contrast to hired hands, mercenary sheep keepers who do not love and protect the sheep. But the good shepherd cares for them, even at the risk of his/her life.

“I am the good shepherd”, Jesus said, and the good shepherd is one who “lays down his life for the sheep.” As Jesus himself who “loved us and gave himself for us.”

How our human hearts are moved when we see people risking, giving their lives to save other people’s lives. How much more are our hearts moved by Jesus’ own life given for us, and for all.

God, the good shepherd does whatever it takes for our lives to flourish. Our flourishing is god’s desire for us. I’ve thought of all the lovely “Shepherd” hymns we’ve sung in our lives:

Savior, like a shepherd lead us,

Much we need Thy tender care... (Dorothy Trumpp)

And

He leadeth me, O blessed thought,

O words with heavenly comfort fraught!

What-e’er I do, wher-e’er I be

Still tis God’s hand that leadeth me.

And

My Shepherd will supply my supply my need, Jehovah is his name... Then the last line: No more a stranger or a guest but like a child at home.

III

Jesus said,

I am the good shepherd.

I know my own and my own know me

Just as the Abba knows me

And I know the Abba.

Somewhere in my memory comes this thought, perhaps from a sermon or prayer or song: When in the world to come we will meet Jesus face to face *we will discover that we have known him all along.*

Known him in the love and bravery of others, in the arms of parents, in every act of costly love, in the faces of saints and strangers, in the glory of the skies. Whether we know it or not, we have known him all along.

Our salvation is found in relationship. We know and we are known, and in that knowing and being known we are loved, utterly loved. The old hymn has

these words: “I know *Whom* I have believed...” *Whom*. Not What as in doctrines, but Whom, as in relationship.

Jesus has shown us a God whom we can love with all our heart and mind and soul and strength.

IV

Now we turn to the Flock. Sometimes we get tied up in knots about who is in the flock and who is not. Years back Alabama Baptists did a mathematical calculation about how many in Alabama were saved and how many were lost, and thus bound for hell. Bill Leonard quipped: How did they get a Xerox copy of the Lamb’s Book of Life!?

Perhaps some of us, some days worry whether *we’re* in the flock. Do I believe enough, and the right things? Am I good enough? Am I just *enough* enough?

And Jesus says a surprising thing:

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.

Other sheep?! That do not belong to this fold?! Maybe we have a chance, even yet!

Maybe there are folds of God that are not Baptist! Or Christian! Maybe Jesus has a bigger flock than we can even imagine!

There's the old story about the man who died and went to heaven. St. Peter was showing him around.

“That room over there is where the Methodists are, and over there where the Catholics are, and over there is where the Presbyterians are.” Then he walked to another room and whispered, “That's when the *Baptists* are.” The man asked back in a whisper: “Why are we whispering?” St. Peter said, “Because the Baptists think they are the only ones here!”

Ever felt like you were the black sheep of Gods' flock? Or that you were permanently outside the flock? Jesus says, “There are *others*! And I am going after them!” We used to sing: “When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be!” There may be a few *surprises* too.

V

And now the Voice; it is the voice of eternal life:

My sheep hear my voice; it is the voice of eternal life. Jesus said,

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.

Never perish? Don't we all perish sometime? The word is literally "die forever", or "die an everlasting death". We will not die *eternally*. Eternal *life*, not eternal death.

His voice is the voice of eternal life. How does it sound? Like this:

Come unto me you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

A brilliant young adult started coming to Myers Park Baptist Church. After a few weeks I asked why he was coming. He replied something like: "I am here because I am leaving open the possibility of God." Then one day he came to me and said, "I want to be baptized." So we went down to the Catawba River, and he was baptized in the company of friends. He asked if he could say something in the water before he was immersed. "Of course", I said. This is what he said:

Come unto me you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me for I am gentle and lowly of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

He went on to the University of Virginia to get a PhD. in Religion and is now a college teacher. He heard the voice of Eternal Life.

So we have heard his voice:

Rise and walk

Your sins are forgiven

You are my Beloved

Live in that love

Follow me.

The voice of Eternal Life. It is like the sound of a majestic river moving deeply within you. Living water welling up to Eternal Life.

There is a prayer written to be prayed before the sermon. I love it:

Eternal God

Help us to hear you Word

And hearing your word, love your Voice

And loving your Voice, do your will.

If I were asked why I am a Christian, a follower of Jesus, I would say: “Because I love his voice.” It is a voice I have heard in scripture, in sermons, in song, in others and in the whisper of the wind.

VI

And finally, the Arms. As scripture says in its lovely voice:

The Eternal God is your dwelling place and underneath are the Everlasting Arms. (Deuteronomy 33:27)

Then Jesus adds:

And no one will snatch them out of my hand. What my *Abba* has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the *Abba's* hand.

God's hands, Christ's hands are strong and sure.

There are those who have been given a salvation anxiety with the ominous phrase: “fallen from grace, fallen from grace.” But here is the good news of the gospel: We and the whole human running race have by the mercy of God, *fallen toward grace*.

It is a grace that is beneath us and around us and holds us sure. We, after all, are not saved by *our* goodness but by *God's* goodness. And God's goodness?

Psalm 23 says it best: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever.”

In a short novel by Wendell Berry, *Remembering*, Andy Catlett, a farmer has lost his right hand in a terrible farming accident. He is on his way to an agricultural conference and is thinking about his life, now without his right hand. Here are Berry’s words:

His right hand had been the one with which he reached out to the world and attached himself to it. When he lost his hand he lost his hold...All the world then became to him a steep slope, and he was a man descending, staggering and falling, unable to reach out to tree trunk or branch or root to catch and hold on.

This is what loss does: we lose that which attached us to the world. Later, he realizes these words as from the Voice of God: “*Though he does not hold, he is held.*”¹

That’s it! The gospel. There are all kinds of ways we lose our hold. *But when we lose our hold we are held.* Held in the Everlasting Arms. I don’t know any better news than this.

Leaning, leaning,

Safe and secure from all alarms;

Leaning, leaning,

Leaning on the Everlasting Arms. (Elisha A. Hoffman)

How then shall we live? In *A Perfect Friend*, a children's book by the novelist Reynolds Price, the boy's friend, the elephant, says to him: *Behind you is safe. All around you is safe. Be fearless now.*²

1. Wendell Berry, *Remembering in Three Short Novels*, (Washington, D.C.:Counterpoint Press, 2002), pp. 142,167

2. Reynolds Price, *A Perfect Friend*, (N.Y.: Atheneum Press, 2000) p.90.