

11 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

(John 10:11-18)

Whenever we read Scripture – whatever we make of the message – we have to acknowledge that there are images offered that are sometimes difficult to apply to modern life. Parables of planting and harvesting need some background when proclaimed to an urban audience. Ancient Jewish laws and customs are hard to unravel for most of us. The scope of a shepherd's work is virtually unknown in the modern, western world.

Sure, we might understand modern farming & ranching practices - and maybe you know someone who keeps sheep – but if we're honest, our understanding of shepherds is romanticized just a little bit – thanks mostly to this morning's Scripture lessons.

The 23 Psalm offers an ideal vision of 'the Lord [as] my shepherd;' a personal guide and protector – a guardian angel par excellence. So strong and secure is this imagery, that I've no doubt many of you are disappointed by the version we read a moment ago.

The slight alterations in the wording – the changes to the rhythms so familiar to us from the King James version – the smallest alterations force us to concentrate on the words again. The message is the same, but it is delivered differently. Jesus is familiar with this tactic – a way to call the listener to attention.

And so, speaking to those who know a thing or two about the task, the place in society, and the vocational reputation of shepherds, Jesus offers himself as the alternative to the familiar. “I am the GOOD shepherd.”

Not a hired hand. Not afraid of the challenges that present themselves in the darkest parts of the night, when predators are abundant. Jesus paints a familiar picture with a twist; this shepherd will take risks to secure the safety of the sheep. He will ‘lay down his life for the sheep.’

I don’t know how often a shepherd was killed on the job. In the social structure of the day, shepherds were not the leading citizens, so no epic poems are written to honour their sacrifices in the life of duty. And modern stock-keepers will go to great lengths to protect their investment, but not many are willing to die so their livestock might live. This is Jesus shaking up the comfortable image of what was a fairly common sight – a shepherd minding the flock – and offering us a way to understand the depth of care that God provides.

These two scriptures taken together (as they often are) give even the most urbanized person among us a way in to this ancient metaphor.

We may not always be flattered when we’re compared to sheep, but in the picture painted by these Scriptures, we discover the truth (and the comfort) in the comparison.

We are loved and eagerly sought by our shepherd. And having answered God’s call, we are promised the comfort of God’s presence in every circumstance. Our good shepherd looks to the diversity of the flock, calling those who ‘aren’t from here,’ and offering them the same assurance - the same loving care - and this idea too smashes the understanding of what shepherding is.

This 'flock' is large and scattered. When we look around and imagine what the limits of Jesus care might be, we are tempted to stop too soon. This congregation – that denomination – these here but not those there...our imaginations cannot contain the limits of the shepherd's responsibilities. Jesus' voice still calls – Jesus' sheep are still being gathered. The shepherd's task is long from finished. And to make things even more interesting, we are invited to 'go and make disciples.'

We who have heard the voice now help share the story; to bring the voice of Jesus to the world. More often than not we make a mess of it. Centuries of church sponsored violence and denominational in-fighting suggest that we certainly aren't good shepherds. But the voice of Jesus is still recognizable in spite of the noise the church often makes. The promise of comfort and guidance survives the rules and regulations that the church uses to 'manage the flock.' The promise of Jesus survives our ignorance, our abuse, our misunderstanding and mockery, and stands ready to welcome all who respond to the authentic voice of love and care. The good shepherd calls us, from the ancient Scripture, from the challenges and cares of the modern world, the good shepherd still calls us. Blessed be those who answer that call.