

Enfolded by Love

The biblical image of *shepherd* – used to describe both God and Jesus – is one of steadfast love and faithfulness. The focus text and psalm invite us to imagine God’s ultimate care for humankind through the essential qualities of a good shepherd: caring, rescuing, feeding, protecting, and guiding. Such love enfolds us as we journey as disciples of the Risen One.

Focus Scripture: John 10:11–18

In John 10:1–6, Jesus offers a story to illustrate his mission among the people of God. This is a continuation of his dialogue with the Pharisees after the healing of one born blind in John 9. When the Pharisees and others who might have been listening do not understand the metaphor of “gatekeeper,” Jesus goes on to describe himself as “the gate for the sheep” (v. 7).

As we enter the focus scripture, Jesus casts himself as “the good shepherd,” a metaphor used for God in Ezekiel 34:11–31 and Psalm 23. It is likely that the gospel writer and the first readers of John made this connection – Jesus is claiming to be one with God and to be doing God’s work. The image of the good shepherd is rich: the shepherd cares for and protects the flock, returns lost sheep to the fold, and feeds the flock. This good shepherd puts the well-being of the flock ahead of everything else, even the shepherd’s own life. The first readers of John, and we today, are able to ponder the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection through this powerful image.

After saying what the good shepherd will do, Jesus adds what the shepherd will not do. Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with a hired hand, who does not have ultimate commitment to – or covenant with – the sheep.

Building from the earlier verses about being “the gate for the sheep,” Jesus fills out this teaching with a word about the sheep in the shepherd’s charge. The good shepherd opens up the “pen” – the place of relationship with the shepherd, where sheep receive care and protection – to all who respond to Jesus’ voice. One might wonder if this might have been heard by the first readers as assurance and encouragement that no matter who they were, they belonged to Jesus. One might won-

der about the reaction of those who heard Jesus’ voice and did not respond. What might it have meant to the religious authorities that Jesus was extending such an invitation to those beyond their jurisdiction?

Beloved by many Christians and Jews, Psalm 23 speaks of God as shepherd. These 6 short verses are an expression of the psalmist’s confidence in God’s protection. The words assure those who follow in God’s way that God provides for every need, and that the paths of God are defined by steadfast love and faithfulness.

The good shepherd is the one whom God uses to rescue God’s people. In Acts 4:5–12, we find the third sermon that Peter preaches following the day of Pentecost. Peter’s words go to the heart of the message: the resurrected Christ both heals and saves.

The writer of 1 John links the actions of Jesus with the actions of the church. In 1 John 3:16–24, believers are called to ground their lives in God’s commandments so that mind and actions are in harmony. The presence of the Holy Spirit is mentioned as a sign that Christ is present with believers, a shepherding force to enable them to live and love in truth and action.

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The shepherd metaphor has continuing power. It still invites God’s children to wonder about the ultimate love and care that God extends, and how Jesus was living the way of God. Some churches observe today as Good Shepherd Sunday. Through today’s good shepherd passages, we are able to connect God’s ultimate care with the love of Christ, who loves in “truth and action.” When and where do you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd? To what is the shepherd calling you and your church?

May 3, 2009

Focus Scripture
John 10:11–18

Additional Scriptures
Acts 4:5–12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16–24

**Loving Shepherd,
hold us close and
care for us each
day. Lead us, guide
us, challenge us,
that we might form
a more faithful
community
that journeys in
your way.
Amen.**

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

