

The Shepherd

"To get more fully at this reversal image of the shepherd I would ask you to imagine ... There is this burly, bearded, tattooed motorcycle bad guy with the lamb around his shoulders. No way, is our first response. Redemption comes from there?"

Season of Easter

Fourth Sunday

John 10:22-30

Read the Bible passage: [John 10:22-30](#), The Message; or [John 10:22-30](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this post.

The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

When we go to a movie or see a drama there is always some music to introduce the main characters. In today's text we have two main characters - the lamb and the shepherd. The first we are introduced to is the lamb. For the Psalm is told from the viewpoint of the sheep, not the shepherd.

The image of us being sheep also has its problems. It tends to be used to put down those who follow without thought. It is kind of mindlessness that some critics of religion place on believers. I think most of us are uncomfortable with being thought of as unthinking, sheep like followers. If we had music to underline the character it would be Neil Young's, *Helpless, Helpless*.

We are not really happy with this sense, for after all have we not got some strength and power to deal with the issues of life?

We have to move back in time to see how sheep and shepherds were understood. Part of the mythic-poetic narrative was the one of the lamb - innocence - as the one for sacrifice. It was the symbol in the Passover of the liberating acts of God, from slavery to freedom, from no people to a people. It was the risk and venerability of the lamb that the poet was getting at - in the 23rd Psalm - it was from the view point of the lamb who now has no fear, for the rod and staff comfort. The shepherd of shepherds cares for me, as the hymn puts it. Now I can face my enemies - external and internal - and overcome in love. It is a realistic understanding that there are wolves who seek the end of the lamb. There is danger out there in the world. The obvious image is the role of the shepherd is keep the wolves at bay - to protect.

Every Sunday, when I was growing up, I looked at the stain glass image at the front of the church. It was so vivid that when I close my eyes I can still see that iconic picture of Jesus as the great Shepherd. There he was in vivid color, with the lamb over his shoulders.

There was a strange comfort in that image. But being a prairie boy, lambs and sheep were not in my experience. Cows, pigs and chickens yes. Raised on Saturday afternoon cowboy movies - shepherds were

always the bad guy, moving into ranching territory and ruining it. So the comfort was always colored with threat.

Shepherds were the outcasts of society - like the fishers they were unclean by vocation. So in Jesus' time, when the shepherd comes on the movie screen, the lyric of Willie Nelson's song would be changed to, *Mamas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Shepherds*, for they hang out in all the wrong places.

In the tradition, though, there is the whole kingly image of the shepherd. But it is a strange image for a king - the boy shepherd David becomes the king. A reversal of all conventional images of power and prestige. So the image the power of God as that of the shepherd again would be a puzzle - protection that comes from persuasion not coercion.

Competing images. Comfort and threat. Unthinking following and being cared for. The good shepherd, the shepherd who guides you through the valley of the shadow of death, evokes a sense of calm and strength. And the lamb was an image of sacrifice, so here is the shepherd who is both lamb and shepherd.

Here the good shepherd is the sign of divinity. The lamb of sacrifice being the force of love that overcomes the threat of Imperial Powers. It turns all images of kingship and power upside down. From the outsider comes redemption. From the edges of experience comes resurrection life. It reinforces the biblical theme that God upsets the notions of respectability. It reinforces the images that the God of love welcomes all who society would call the least.

To get more fully at this reversal image of the shepherd I would ask you to imagine the stain glass image this way. There is this burly, bearded, tattooed motorcycle bad guy with the lamb around his shoulders. No way, is our first response. Redemption comes from there? It turns all our images of the good guy upside down and makes us focus on acts not appearance.

In the shepherd and the lamb the different parts of experience are brought together. Shepherding in this sense creates us as persons and as communities. The shepherd illuminates the lure of God that unites in beautiful, symmetrical harmony things we often see as unrelated. Our varied, complex pluralistic world, with many different perspective are in the shepherding care of God formed into a complex unity.

The lamb is not sent to be a sacrificial offering, for it is the lamb who destroys all images of being handed over as a sacrifice to appease some angry force - there is no demand that someone has to die to save us. Rather it is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, not through sacrifice but by experiencing our suffering with us and not being overcome. It is the shepherd who walks with us, feels with us, who gives us the strength to be the lamb and shepherd for others.

It is the noble hero who knows the risks and keeps the course for justice. So it is the dual function of God who is both lamb and shepherd. It is the willingness to die for the sheep that God leaves the role of shepherd to be the lamb. It is a powerful image of the God who protects us and suffers with us. The protection takes place in suffering and we are not stuck there, we are not defined by it, for with support and love we can live with it

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May the Lure be with you

and through it. With the help of others we can overcome suffering. Together, we can build a new kingdom of love on earth.

It is not what we say, look like or believe that is crucial. What is crucial for the common good is how our faith leads to action. It is in the doing good we begin to evaluate the character of the person around us. It is to be surprised by love.

We need love. We need the unconditional love of persuasive love to get on with the getting on. What we need to do is to recognize it breaking out in the unexpected places.

We know those people, named and not named who can be counted upon to speak justice and compassion to the forces that seek to destroy. We know those who use persuasion to bring hope to chaos. They are the Nelson Mandelas, the Martin Luther Kings and those whose name never hit the front page. We have all had a shepherd who revealed to us the persuasive love of God for all of creation. Know what. We too can be that shepherd. Know what. We have been that shepherd who brings healing comfort to those in pain, who feel in our very being the fears of the world and are not undone. We have been those who have kept the wolves of life away. We are called to this vocation.

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