

In the Name...

“Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

The only direct experience I have of sheep and shepherds is from the summer I spent with the Benedictines in upstate New York when I was nineteen. The monks prayed seven times a day, and in between they operated a sheep farm and an apple orchard. The Benedictine motto, after all, is “ora et labora”: prayer and work. I spent most of my labora in the orchard, pruning the branches and thinking about sayings like “I am the vine, ye are the branches” from John’s gospel. Yeah, I was *that* kind of nineteen-year-old. Is it any wonder I ended up here?

In addition to vineyards, Jesus also talks a lot about sheep in that gospel, as he does in today’s reading. This Sunday is known as Good Shepherd Sunday because of the lections appointed for today, though in the old lectionary, which we still follow at Evensong, *last* Sunday was Good Shepherd Sunday, which is why we heard similar themes, including Psalm 23 at Evensong last week. The twenty-third psalm is undoubtedly the best-known passage in the entire Bible, even among those who have never been to church or synagogue.

King David, who is traditionally credited with writing the book of Psalms, was both a shepherd *and* a musician. He is often displayed in art playing the harp. At Mt. Saviour Monastery, Brother Pierre was *our* Davidic figure. He played the harp every night at Compline and served as the chief shepherd of the literal sheep, though the monastery’s prior, Father Martin, was its spiritual shepherd.

One morning, all of us were taken off our various work details in the orchard, bookstore, and kitchen, and told we needed to be farmhands for the day. That day was a momentous occasion: the separation of the spring lambs from the ewes, their mothers. The lambs were to be weaned and sorted by sex. The males were to be further sorted, some to be gelded, eventually bound for the slaughterhouse, and some to become the rams who would ensure the ewes kept producing those spring lambs every year. We had been warned in advance *not* to enter the rams’ enclosure, because they were just as aggressive as bulls and fighting cocks. (Testosterone is a terrible thing when left unchecked.)

But I digress. To get back on track with my story: We herded the ewes and their lambs down a long hill onto a dirt road running between the chapel and the guesthouses, all the way down to the barns, where they were corralled into chutes. There, Brother Pierre would inoculate them, de-worm them if need be, and sort them into one pen or another.

As the ewes came trotting down the hill, I could tell that many of them were used to this routine. They looked straight ahead and stayed on the road. But for the lambs, this was their first adventure outside their enclosure. As soon as they passed through the sheepgate, they were eager to set off on their own, gamboling, scampering and cavorting as they went, frequently skipping off into the fields. We were told not to worry about them, because the farm had sheep dogs. In fact, they had two kinds of sheep dogs: the friendly, shaggy ones who looked just like the sheep, whose job it was to herd the lambs gently back towards the road, and the Australian sheep dogs, who looked more like wolves, whose job it was to hunt down the lambs who went too far afield and to grab them *by the throat* and drag them back by force if need be. Sometimes, those lambs looked the worse for wear by the time they were deposited back on the right pathway.

I was reminded of this pastoral experience when I received an email commentary on Psalm 23 from Andrew McGowan, who currently serves as the Dean of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, my alma mater. I subscribe to his weekly lectionary reflections. Dean McGowan writes, “The Psalm, which is the oldest text and possibly the most familiar, is not necessarily the best-understood, in that despite its ‘pastoral’ idyll, *political* imagery is central. While the divine ‘shepherd’ provides for the Davidic hymnodist (himself a king?), he is also a disciplinarian. Some commentators rush to interpret the rod and staff as means of protecting the flock, but these tools are also and especially the means of *guiding* it. Their use as political symbols is better-known in the ominous Pharaonic imagery of the king with crook and flail. While the use of these against predators may be implied, the direction of the flock along right pathways for its own good—and ‘for his Name’s sake’—does not happen by GPS, but by use of the stick.”¹

And, I might add, by sheep dogs. If you think about it, the monastery’s two types of sheep dog exemplify the two very different functions of a good shepherd: A pastor needs to know when gentle nudging is required, but can’t be afraid to be somewhat *more directive*, shall we say, from time to time. In parish life, when we hear the term “pastoral care”, we usually picture the gentle guide, rather than the rod and the staff. But sometimes harder truths need to be addressed. We have strayed too far and need to be brought back along right pathways, for God’s sake—and our own.

I’m certainly not implying that a leader, lay or ordained, ever has justification to be violent in word or deed. But it’s important to recognize that, as our Psalm and other readings from this morning suggest, the pastoral office, if exercised in fidelity to the Good Shepherd, is both disciplinary *and* pastoral. As Dean McGowan writes, “The Psalm thus uses the sheep-shepherd imagery to underscore not just...peace and plenty but frailty and dependence. Shepherds in general are assumed to be wielders of the rod, not just providers of pasture. The divine shepherd is no less [pastoral], but more reliably *a leader whose discipline will lead us to what we need.*”

These disciplines are already familiar to most of us. Like the ewes who knew where they were headed from past experience, I assume that most of *this* flock has already been sufficiently disciplined, that is, *discipled*, to know what all of us need if we are to follow the Good Shepherd whithersoever he leads us. These include regular participation in worship, private and/or group study of the Scriptures and other spiritual writings, and daily prayer. Add to these the practises of confession, forgiveness, visiting the sick and prisoners, feeding the hungry, caring for the poor and needy; there is no end to the disciplines that guide and direct us in our spiritual journeys. Truly, when we practice the faith, our cup runneth over.

That said, no matter how old we are, whether we are lay or ordained, some—perhaps many—of us are still, spiritually speaking, lambs. We prefer to scamper and cavort rather than get down on our knees in prayer. We stray a little too far off the beaten path, where, if we’re not careful, we encounter not wolfish sheep dogs there to drag us back to the straight and narrow, but wolves themselves, who have no need of sheep’s clothing because we’ve wandered into their territory of our own free will.

Free will. That’s the thing, you see. It’s both a gift and a curse. We need the Good Shepherd and each other to lead us through “the valley of the shadow of death”. We need to be trained.

¹ Substack email; emphases added.

Let me give you an example that's literally close to home. Many of you know and love our dog, Coco. One can say many good things about Coco, but she's no sheep dog.

When my family adopted Coco, I was rather, shall I say, *reluctant*. Anne and I are both cat people by disposition, so this was a big step outside our comfort zone. I consoled myself by telling Anne, "Well, at least dogs—unlike our cats *or* our children—can be trained." But I think I jinxed us. Coco is well over a year old now and is still somewhat *unrestrained*. Not that it's *her* fault. We have simply not applied enough consistent discipline. Unlike a good shepherd, we don't reliably devote ourselves to the task of training her, but instead, both she and we are rather more like lambs, allowing our focus to wander as it will. As a result, Coco herself often goes astray, to the detriment of every couch cushion, pillow, towel, toothbrush, and roll of toilet tissue in the house.

She is willful, but we still intend to turn her desires to that which will fill her most deeply and in a healthy way. Margaret, who is by far the best animal whisperer in our household, has taken on the role of pastoral disciplinarian. Margaret has already trained Coco in the command, "Leave it!" We, too, could benefit from such training.

Just as my family knows that Coco has a good and sweet spirit and does not want to stray, Jesus knows that we, too, desire to be kept on the right pathways for his name's sake. And Psalm 23 reassures me in the knowledge that he is here to comfort and to guide, to reward and redirect, and, ultimately, to welcome me home to the fold no matter what I've done.

For in the end, under the watchful eye of the Good Shepherd, we are *comforted* even by his disciplinary rod and staff. The setting of boundaries, the training of desires, the restraining of self to right action: these things are difficult to learn and require us to do actual work, but they also feel good as we make incremental progress. This is why I know that my place during the week is in that Rector's Stall for Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, and, following my rule of life as a priest companion of the Oratory of the *Good Shepherd*, at least three times during the week at Mass.

Discipline is not for Lent only, but for Eastertide as well, and for every day of the year. As we mark the feasts and fasts of the Christian year, we follow the Good Shepherd along the way that leads to eternal life, where we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Truly, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

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