

Sheepish?: Psalm 23; John 10:22-30; Revelation 7:13-17

by [Mary Schertz](#) in the [April 20, 2004](#) issue

Although the images of shepherd and sheep wind their way through these lectionary texts, they are difficult images for the contemporary church to embrace. Not only are most of us on this continent far removed from the practices of shepherding; we also believe that the notion has taken on a negative connotation. To describe someone as a sheep, in 2004, is an insult. I recall many of the adults in one congregation cringing during a children's time a few years ago, when a well-intentioned volunteer tried to teach the children a song that had them "baa-ing" for Jesus. What are we teaching our children, some of us wondered: To follow the crowd without question? To have no mind of one's own? To expect someone else to take care of us?

But in these readings we have sheep, and we have an abundance of them. In Psalm 23, the most memorized text of the Bible after the Lord's Prayer, we meet the Lord's sheep as represented by the psalmist. According to this psalm, the Lord's sheep do not need anything. They spend their days lying in green pastures. They wander beside quiet, placid lakes and walk along straight paths—paths of righteousness that might be interpreted as paths with justified margins. The rod and staff of the shepherd protect the sheep and a pleasant "table" awaits them when they're hungry.

It is a bucolic scene—until we also notice that the paths of righteousness could also mean the ways of justice. Or until we notice that the poem also talks about walking fearlessly through valleys that are like night, filled with deep shadows. Or until we notice that the table spread with abundant food also happens to be surrounded by enemies. Then the bucolic scene takes on a darker cast and is no longer quite so pleasant to contemplate. The sheep in the psalm become more complicated creatures. They have a double consciousness: they believe in the shepherd's providence, but that belief does not blind them to the terrors that await them along the ways of justice. It begins to look more like radical trust than blind obedience.

The opening scene in the John passage is similarly pleasant. It is Hanukkah time in a Middle Eastern winter, the author tells us. Jesus is walking in the portico of

Solomon's temple. Jesus' recreational moment on this feast day, however, is short-lived. Controversy soon arises as some of his opponents challenge him to declare plainly whether he is the Messiah or not. As the end of the passage makes clear, this question is anything but innocent. Jesus sidesteps the danger by pointing to his good works. Those who follow him and believe in him, those who are his sheep, understand that the work Jesus is doing is the result of his identification with, rather than usurping of, God. There is understanding, knowledge and trust between sheep and shepherd. There is also protection, but it is protection in an ultimate sense rather than as a safe life in the present. This is made abundantly clear when, in the next scene, Jesus' opponents take up stones with the intent to kill him.

The Revelation text features an eschatological scene in which a number of worshipers robed in white and waving palm branches fall on their faces around the throne of God. Of all the passages in this set of texts, this one is the most idyllic. The worshipers gathered around the throne are promised that they will no longer hunger or thirst. They will no longer be the victims of the burning sun or scorching heat. They will be shepherded by the Lamb at the center of the throne—a Lamb who is, in an interesting metaphoric turn, also the shepherd who will guide them to the springs of the water of life where God will wipe away every tear.

But even here, where the seer is gathering up the great idealist images of the prophetic texts, there is a heaviness evident. The white-robed, worshiping "sheep" have come out of an ordeal. They have washed their magnificent white robes in the blood of the Lamb. The Lamb who is the shepherd, it turns out, is also the crucified Christ.

The biblical imagery of sheep and their shepherd does not quite match our assumptions—be they positive or negative assumptions. None of our metaphors of sheep quite matches the picture of Psalm 23 that we admired in Sunday school. Certainly, faith in God as provider and protector is there—but so are the shadowed valleys, surrounding enemies, potential lynch mobs, ordeals and even crucifixion.

These sheep are not the blindly obedient animals that we find unsuitable models for children, especially for girls. Rather, the images of sheep are juxtaposed with darker and darker realities. These passages give every evidence of being crafted by thoughtful and deeply experienced writers who are trying to communicate what it means to live by a radical trust in God in the midst of terror, enmity and death—some of the greatest challenges to faith.

They are not allegorists, drawing out every analogy to sheep that can be made and offering sheep as a model for Christian life. Sheep in the fullness of their animal existence are neither a good model for Christian life nor any other kind of human life. Rather, these writers are metaphorists dipping into the imagery to characterize a feature of faith that carries us through our darkest hours. This trust, like the ways of a sheep with its shepherd, is a radical trust that empowers us to believe that life has Christian meaning, even though our immediate experience may be telling us otherwise.