

Sunday, April 21, 2013: John 10:22-30

by [Robert Rimbo](#) in the [April 17, 2013](#) issue

I've always been challenged by the lectionary readings for this Sunday. Although both Psalm 23 and John refer to Jesus the Shepherd and us as sheep, I live in New York City, and as far as I can tell, even the Sheep Meadow in Central Park has no sheep. Yet we sing Psalm 23 each year on this Sunday and at countless other times in convalescent homes and at gravesides. We claim "the Lord is my shepherd" often—and not only in the poetry of this psalm.

It's an enduring image, one that's been captured perhaps millions of times in our art, our liturgy, our stories. Why? For one thing, the image is used throughout scripture, not just in the Psalms and in John.

Yahweh is a shepherd who leads Israel like a flock. Jacob gave praise to the God who shepherded him (Gen. 48). This Shepherd-God led the enslaved out of Egypt and guided them in the wilderness (Ps. 78). Ezekiel, contrasting the faithfulness of God with the leaders who forsook the exiles when Israel was laid waste and thousands were deported, proclaims God's promise: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed . . . bind up the injured . . . strengthen the weak"—which is exactly what God did, unlike the rulers, the "killer shepherds" who fed themselves, exploited the sheep and deserted the flock (Ezek. 34).

In the New Testament, Jesus is the Shepherd sent to welcome a little flock into the reign of God, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, and the leaders of the fledgling flock are commissioned to feed and tend the sheep (John 21). It is no wonder that in many ordination rites the exhortation from 1 Peter rings out: "Tend the flock of God that is your charge . . . not under compulsion but willingly . . . not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2-3). Paul urges presbyters to "Keep watch over . . . all the flock . . . the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son" (Acts 20:28). It is a matter of following Christ, the Shepherd.

Sheep and shepherds are all over scripture, but the images don't do much for many of us. They linger for a while around December 25, when we listen to the message and pay a call on a new family staying in a stable. The sheep are mute creatures that do what they're told to do (so I've been told); they don't lead, they follow, and if they don't follow, a dog nearby keeps them in line.

We don't like being led around by the nose. We might have a healthy respect for authority, but we can do without a dog nipping at our heels. And to some Christians, the bishop's crosier, shaped like a shepherd's crook, only brings to mind its original purpose: to keep the wayward in line.

Those of us who see sheep only on Christmas cards and have never known a shepherd may have trouble making sense of these images. But I urge all of us: don't surrender the symbols of scriptures too soon. Remember that God has spoken to us most often in exactly such images, in signs we can sense and see and hear and touch and taste and smell. These signs work mysteriously on our minds and souls. They suggest more than they can clearly define or describe, pregnant with a depth of meaning that is evoked rather than stated: a temple, a cross, a bronze serpent, Moses, Jesus, a lost son or a lost sheep. Don't give those up. This is how God speaks to us. Biblical language speaks to us just as painting and poetry, sculpture and architecture, music and dancing speak to us.

Don't shake off this image simply because there are no sheep in the Sheep Meadow in Central Park. God is still trying to tell us something. Instead, take the image out of ancient Palestine, shake it, stir it, work it over and let it work on you.

Today we are reminded that the shepherd beyond all shepherds is Jesus. To be sure, others are called shepherds—pastors and bishops, counselors and rulers. But they are only shepherds in how they resemble him. And what is the main characteristic of this Good Shepherd?

Care. Thank God, he cares. He could have left us to ourselves, but he took on our flesh, grew in it, faced temptation in it and died in the most extraordinary act of love in human history—not only for sheep like us who behaved, but for each solitary one who wandered (and wanders) off. He doesn't beat that wanderer with his crosier. He lays him or her on his shoulders, brings the person home and throws a party.

This shepherd cares for all his flock, but also for you and me as unique individuals called to live in this shepherd's flock forever. This shepherd calls us by name, knows

us more intimately than we know ourselves, knows it's tough being a creature of flesh and blood, spirit, intelligence and freedom. No matter how far we stray, this shepherd will track us down, cradle us in his arms and bring us home gently on his shoulder.

Follow this Good Shepherd, return his love. Care as this Shepherd cares, open your arms wide to those who need your compassion and love. Help make the world a sheep meadow.