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by [Amy B. Hunter](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

I had already attended two colleges when one day I wandered into a third. The sign above the door of an old mansion in Fort Vancouver, Washington, read “Evergreen State College.”

“What seminars are you offering this fall?” I asked a woman behind the desk. “Reality,” she responded. “Sign me up!” I replied.

Fifteen years later I was attending an Evergreen State alumni meeting when the president of the college asked our group, “Was Evergreen your first college?” A few hands went up. “Your second?” A few more hands went up. “For how many of you was Evergreen your third college?” Most hands, including mine, went up. The president studied us a moment and said, “We did a bad job of finding you.”

Yes, perhaps I could have used a better shepherd, but I had also needed to try different college “gates” before I entered the right one.

The two non-Gospel readings speak of shepherds and flocks, of the world on the other side of the gate. Acts paints a picture of the Christian community behaving as if it were the beginning of a love affair. In terms of the human they expressed the highest forms of togetherness and generosity, and in terms of the divine they experienced wondrous signs. That image reminds me of that moment in front of that desk at Evergreen State, when I was ready to sign on.

But then there’s 1 Peter. Here, the flock isn’t experiencing devotion and wonders and signs, but pain and injustice. I’m willing to see it as a good dose of reality. After all, I’m not still in that comfortable college setting discussing “reality” as portrayed by philosophers and the media. And the Christian church is no longer living in communal bliss in Jerusalem. There’s a world beyond the intimacy and the intensity of first ardor, cautions the New Testament writer, a world that is not always easy or kind. The temptation in the rapture of finding one’s own flock is to forget other

obligations or dismiss them as less worthy. But being an Evergreen student doesn't allow me to skip paying my taxes. Being a writer doesn't exempt me from responsibilities to my husband and our sons (though it does permit frequent ordering of take-out). Belonging to the flock named Christian doesn't exempt us from the requirement of living in the wider world.

Before I get too cozy with the responsibility in these verses, however, I note verse 18 (conveniently omitted). "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh." I hear the writer telling the readers a hard truth. Their Christian faith isn't an escape hatch. They are still citizens, spouses or (alas) slaves, and the claims of those roles are still upon them.

Yet this message angers me too. I think of the various oppressions of the vulnerable and the powerless in our world. And I believe that my resisting the directive to accept one's lot (no matter how oppressed) and strive for goodness (no matter how poorly treated) has merit. Just as the rapture of beginning doesn't carry us through, neither does suffering for its own sake. After September 11 my first response was to gather my flock. I phoned or e-mailed family and friends, taking inventory of those I love. I took refuge in my parish. We gathered to recite an ancient liturgy that implores God for deliverance from all kinds of calamities. One woman said the words reminded her that we are part of a long history of people who have suffered war and famine and pestilence, and still call upon God. Our flock became larger as we communed with all of those saints.

But now church attendance has dipped. The flags on car antennae are rags, the "God Bless America" signs have lost letters and the camaraderie has faded. Enter by the right gate. Nothing else will sustain our endeavors, not even good things like patriotism or naming evil as evil or even suffering in the face of unjust persecution. The rapturous beginnings and the sufferings mean nothing if we haven't entered by the right door. And for Christians the door is the person of Jesus Christ.

I can't answer what that charge means for every Christian, but these readings offer a good place to start. Acts tells us to devote ourselves "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." We gather not for bliss or for escape, but to grow in faith with others. 1 Peter doesn't leave us to suffer injustice passively but points us to Jesus, whose suffering and death were transformed into resurrection. When he "was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he

did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.”

I want the Good Shepherd, someone who sees it as his responsibility to find me when I'm lost and clueless. But instead I get the Good Gate, the invitation to see beyond my beginnings and my sufferings to Jesus who promises, “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”