

April 21, Easter 4B (Psalm 23; John 10:11–18)

## **A dead shepherd isn't helpful to anyone, least of all to the sheep left behind.**

by [Austin Shelley](#) in the [April 2024](#) issue

In the poem “Introduction to Poetry,” Billy Collins laments his students’ tendency to approach a poem with weapons drawn. The former US poet laureate paints a portrait of the delight he hopes they will embrace when encountering verse:

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

He goes on to liken the ideal posture of students before poetry to such playful encounters as dropping a mouse into a poem’s lines or water-skiing across its surface. Instead, the poems Collins loves become subject to torture as students care only “to find out what it really means.”

For months I’ve struggled with this week’s lectionary verses from the Gospel of John. Finally I have come to wonder whether poetry’s resistance to being tied to a chair with rope, as Collins puts it, is at least one reason for the intensity of the struggle. Of all the gospels, it is the fourth that waxes poetic. From its soaring prologue to its tender post-resurrection breakfast on the shoreline—where Jesus repeatedly asks Peter, “Do you love me?”—metaphor and sensory imagery abound. They serve as artful invitations into beauty and truth that bear good news, if a reader is but patient enough to hold this gospel’s poetry up to the Light of the World.

After Collins’s students tie a poem up, they try to “torture a confession out of it” to determine its meaning. Initially lacking a more sensitive approach, I tried unsuccessfully to torture a confession out of Jesus’ insistence that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Does a good shepherd actually do this?

Right out of the gate, I questioned Jesus' assumption. Such a sacrifice seems both unnecessary and shortsighted. Fellow interrogators might agree that a dead shepherd isn't helpful to anyone, least of all to sheep left vulnerable to predators, starvation, and scattering. What's a flock to do without the abiding presence of the rod and staff that comfort? How are the sheep to remain safe, healthy, and together without the soothing tenor of the trusted voice that leads them beside still waters and makes them to lie down in green pastures?

The text's stoic silence in the face of this inquisition pushed me further. And what of these other sheep from another fold? (Is Jesus speaking of contemporary disciples outside of Galilee? Of gentiles?) Did Jesus indeed have the power to lay down his life in order to take it up again? Or shall we believe instead a testimony at odds with John's gospel account, the witness borne by the epistle to the church at Philippi: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5–8).

Either way, we end up nailing Jesus to a cross to find out what he really means.

Pressing an ear against the Fourth Gospel's hive may prove to be a more fruitful endeavor. What if we as students of scripture were to take into account the time elapsed between the life, death, and resurrection of the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the first circulation of this gospel account decades later? What if we were to consider that particular passage of time to be the catalyst for transforming prose into poetry, for coloring the gospel writer's memories of the person of Jesus with the stained-glass hues of the Spirit of Jesus with whom he had abided for many long years? What if, as part of our wrestling this text for a blessing, we were to submit to its strength instead? What if we were to water-ski across its voluminous depths, allowing it to buoy our questions and doubts?

If we were to entertain such a nuanced approach, if we were to assume the posture of those who listen intently to the inner melody the poem hums, if we were to wander into the room of John 10 and feel its walls for a light switch—I believe it is entirely possible that we would hear for ourselves the voice of the Good Shepherd who knows us as his own. Moreover, we would learn something true of him that turns out to be mighty good news: that defying all logic to the contrary, he laid down his life for the sheep. As the Father commands, may we as the body of Christ take it

up again.