

April 17, Fourth Sunday of Easter: Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

by [Austin Shelley](#) in the [March 30, 2016](#) issue

For more than 30 years, Judith Askins taught ninth-grade English. Known for her many idiosyncrasies, Ms. Askins lugged cardboard boxes full of our student papers home in the afternoons and returned the papers, marked in red, the next day. Perhaps all the late-night grading explains why she consumed coffee like water, routinely drinking her fourth or fifth cup of the day during second period.

When the bell rang, Ms. Askins's quirks emerged full force: she recited Shakespeare in a southern accent, diagrammed sentences with surgical precision, and lectured without making eye contact with anyone. As she sang of synesthesia and simile, she set her gaze not on her students' faces but somewhere above our heads. My classmates and I joked that she was teaching to the clouds—to some unattainable height beyond our reach.

It was a good metaphor for her philosophy of education. Ms. Askins perceived in us potential we could not imagine, and she refused to settle for less. While getting an A from her proved nearly impossible, getting an F was even harder. Failure was not an option; nor was resting on our laurels. "Rewrite it," she would kindly insist. And so we would, revising our theses and correcting grammatical gaffes again and again. I once begged for a C on a paper so that I could be relieved of the task of rewriting it a third time. "Vivid verbs, Miss Crenshaw," Ms. Askins replied, glancing over her half-rimmed glasses (and over my head) while ignoring my plea. "Rewrite it, and dazzle me with vivid verbs."

A decade prior to sitting at a desk in Ms. Askins's English class, I sat on a tiny wooden chair in Sunday school. The classroom walls were lined with posters. One displayed the words of Psalm 23 over a background of rolling green hills. In the foreground, Jesus—with visible nail wounds in his hands—cradled a lamb in his arms.

The poster effused comfort and safety. It also inaccurately shaped my sense of both Jesus and shepherds. I now recognize that this blond-haired, blue-eyed figure didn't look much like a first-century Middle Eastern Jew. What's more, the poster illustrated just one aspect of a shepherd's complex role.

The senior minister of the church I serve occasionally reminds congregants that the shepherd's staff has two useful ends: a crook for drawing the sheep away from danger, and a blunt end for prodding them toward places they would rather not go. A good shepherd both protects and agitates as needed, both gathers in for shelter and leads out to graze in new pastures. And so it is with God, the Good Shepherd who draws us in to hold us—but also relentlessly pursues us and, in order that God's purposes might be fulfilled, challenges us to go where we would rather not go. Yes, God comforts and protects us. But God also knows something of our potential and urges us toward that vision.

This week's texts embrace the tension inherent in the shepherd's role. In Revelation 7, Jesus is both lamb and shepherd—both the one whose blood washes the robes of the persecuted multitude and the one who “will guide them to springs of the water of life.” Psalm 23 offers similar imagery of the Lord's provision: “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.”

While the whole psalm testifies to God's tender protection, the verb translated as *follow* can also be rendered as *pursue*: goodness and mercy shall pursue me. This relentless pursuit of the psalmist led to John Calvin's famous characterization of God as the “hound of heaven” who demands to be near us, whether or not we desire it. Like the widow of Luke 18 who persists in knocking on the door of the unjust judge, so the goodness and mercy of the Lord pursue the psalmist to the end of the psalmist's days and beyond.

But what exactly is this goodness of the Lord? What makes the Good Shepherd good? In the Hebrew Bible, goodness is more than being kind; to be good is also to be just and true. The goodness of the Lord, then, refers not exclusively to acts of protection but more holistically to acts of salvation and justice—acts that testify to the Lord's steadfast love.

In John 10, those who question Jesus want the easy answer. They beg for a C in exchange for not having to grapple with metaphors that stretch their understanding. But Jesus, like a seasoned teacher, pushes them beyond their quest for a simple explanation. He points to what he is doing in the world and proclaims that his works of justice—not his words—attune the ears of the flock to his voice. And with a vivid verb he promises that no one will snatch us out of his hand.