

Good shepherds (Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24)

While Ezekiel's shepherd is often on the move, any sheepherder will tell you that this is the exception rather than the rule.

by [Talitha Arnold](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

As a child, I studied many different images of the Good Shepherd. I saw the official version every Sunday in the stained glass window above the altar at First Congregational Church in Tempe, Arizona. That shepherd was a tall, friendly-looking, 30-something man, fair of skin and eye with long, flowing, goldish-brown locks and soft hands. Dressed in a full-length white robe, he seemed remarkably clean for someone who supposedly spent his time chasing sheep. A little lamb nestled in his big, strong arms, while more sheep rested at his feet.

That image in the window, in its various versions, is probably the most familiar representation of the Good Shepherd, the one who, in the words of Ezekiel, will seek out the lost, bring them back from the darkness and lead them to good pastures. Yet as beautiful and peaceful as that image was, it didn't jibe with my own experience.

I'd like to suggest some additional models for Good Shepherd pictures. Perhaps an artist could paint one of the men who wintered their sheep in the alfalfa fields a few blocks from the new subdivision to which my family moved in 1960. No long flowing robes for these sheep herders—the material would have caught on the first cactus they encountered. Their jeans and flannel shirts were far more practical. These would be well worn, muddy and stained with sheep balm. (Like Ezekiel's shepherd, these sheepmen spent a good deal of time binding up the injured and hurt.) Unlike the stained glass Good Shepherd, their skin was brown and weathered, their eyes bloodshot from the Arizona sun, and their hands calloused and cracked.

Ezekiel's shepherd is often on the move, but as any sheepherder will tell you, the times of search are the exception rather than the rule. Herding sheep involves long stretches of standing around watching the sheep eat. Often as not, I'd see one of the

migrant shepherders squatting under the one lone tree in the field, keeping an eye on the flock while taking a long drag on his cigarette.

A weather-beaten Good Shepherd with stained jeans and a Camel in his fingers will probably never make it into a church window. Yet it would represent a lot of God's job with us human beings—waiting around, watching what we're doing, hoping we'll stay out of trouble, and getting us out of it when we don't.

Another childhood experience was envying 4-H friends who lived on the outskirts of town and could raise a lamb or two in their backyards. My 4-H projects were limited to cooking, sewing, collecting insects and working on home beautification. At demonstrations and contests, the little shepherds got to wear jeans and cowboy boots and hang out in the barns. I was stuck in my homemade uniform with its pleated skirt and button-down blouse, and resigned to defending the virtues of chocolate chip cookies and a well-kept house. But my envy turned to empathy when, at the end of the spring fair, the young shepherds' woolly family pets were sold to the highest bidder. I saw more than one small shepherd sit on his hay bale, cowboy hat pulled down over his eyes as he buried a tear-stained face in his arms.

Idea for a window: a nine-year-old Good Shepherd weeping and holding on for dear life to his soon-to-be-lost lamb.

And one more. When I was seven, my mother gave me a book titled *Little Herder in Autumn and Winter*. The first of a series of children's books written in both English and Navajo, it told the story of a little Navajo girl, her family and their sheep. The book's cover showed the traditional Good Shepherd cradling a lamb with a serene, sure look. But the shepherd in the book was a seven-year-old, and the lamb was almost as big as she. Her face was round, her jet black hair was pulled back in a pony tail, and she wore a long, flowing skirt and a velvet blouse.

The story offered an image of a shepherd not unlike Ezekiel's. "It takes many steps to keep up with the sheep," says Little Herder ("Na'nikkaadi Yazhi"). "The way is long, the sand is hot, the arroyos are deep. We walk until the day is done." In the winter when the snow covers everything, Little Herder and her parents take wood from their own dwindling pile in the hogan to build a fire to melt snow for their sheep. And one day, when a ewe is lost, the little girl searches until she finds both it and its new lamb. Even though it's late, she's hungry and the lamb is heavy, Little Herder carries it all the way home because it's too young to walk quickly and a

coyote is howling. Ezekiel's Good Shepherd (or Isaiah's or Matthew's) has nothing on Little Herder.

Say "Good Shepherd" to most Christians, at least in this country, and chances are we see the stained glass window that I saw as a child. But Good Shepherds come in all sizes, shapes, ages and colors. As Ezekiel himself would argue, it's the care for the sheep and the goodness of the shepherd that counts.

A weathered brown-skinned man with sheep balm on his jeans and a cigarette in his calloused hand. A boy pulling his cowboy hat down over his eyes so you can't see his tears. A little Navajo herder holding the lost lamb she's keeping safe from the coyotes. All are images of Good Shepherds, and according to Ezekiel, all are images of God. Any stained glass makers around?