

Savior like a shepherd: Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:1-18

by [William Brosend](#) in the [May 3, 2000](#) issue

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.*

How is a church like a sheepfold? Both are filled with funny-smelling creatures that will follow just about anyone just about anywhere . . . Why does a pastor tend a flock? To fleece 'em . . .

Is it just me, or is there more than a little bit of tension in the way we deal with biblical and ecclesial images of sheep and shepherds, pastors and flocks? Good Shepherd Sunday notwithstanding, how complimentary is it to refer to the members of a church as a flock of sheep, and how appropriate is it to speak of clergy as pastors? More to the point, is that Jesus's point in John 10?

The tenth chapter of John is a rhetorical and metaphorical mess. Yes, I too grew up with the picture of Jesus with the lamb on his shoulders, but the image probably comes from Matthew 18:12f., not John 10. Here Jesus begins by contrasting himself as a sheep owner to a thief who scales the wall. The owner knows and calls the sheep by name: when he leads them out, they willingly follow. But when the thief calls, the sheep scatter. This metaphorical mix—proper entry, known names, familiar voice, leading and following contrasted with surreptitious entry and strange voices—then yields to altogether different imagery. Jesus becomes the gate by which all must enter and exit, while everyone else is a thief or bandit out to steal and destroy. It is at this point that we read the famous line, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” But what exactly does an abundant life look like to a sheep?

Finally, in John 10:11 we read, “I am the good shepherd.” Now the contrast is not between owner and thief, right or wrong entry and the true gate, but between owner and hired servant, between the one who runs from the wolf and the One who lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus is not done, however. The imagery shifts from good shepherd to the shepherd of multiple flocks (“I have sheep who do not belong to this fold”) and a new central metaphor: “There will be one flock, one shepherd.”

There's plenty of tension here, and more if we consider Peter's speech in Acts 4, where he seems interested in keeping strays out of the fold ("There is salvation in no one else") and 1 John 3:16-24, which picks up on the theme of the One who lays down his life of his own accord and then sees an outrageous connection between Jesus' action and our own: "We ought to lay down our lives for one another." How can God's love abide in anyone, the writer continues, who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

We will not resolve all the metaphorical tensions in John 10, or the ecclesial tensions between the one gate and the multiple sheepfolds, or the tension between Peter's insistence on salvation in the one name and 1 John's insistence on salvation in something more than name only. Nor should we forget the tension between popular images of clergy as pastors, Jesus's reminder that there is one shepherd, and 1 John's suggestion that we follow Jesus's example and lay down our lives for one another. Instead we have to choose, and choose carefully. Which among the many metaphors is central for our own lives, and how do we allow that metaphor to work its way in and through our faith? Or is it that the metaphor chooses us, and shapes us accordingly?

Father James Callan, a colleague, mentor and friend, shares a lesson that he learned early in his ministry, a valuable lesson that many of us are still struggling to accept. When Jesus said there will be one flock, one shepherd, he was not asking for applications. The position is filled. With that realization comes an extraordinary freedom to be about the work of ministry without needing to be in control.

There is a great deal of difference between thinking that one is laying down one's life for the "sheep" and that we are called to lay down our lives for each other. John 10 is about Jesus; 1 John 3 is about us. In his book *Can't Hold Back the Spring*, Callan quotes Ezekiel 34: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak . . ."

The trouble is that when you give the task of shepherd and gatekeeper to God, you lose control over who enters the fold. When you take seriously the admonition in 1 John 3:17 to help a brother or sister in need and forget to ask whether or not the author of 1 John intended the words to apply only to the Johannine community, you might start helping the "wrong" people. And they might like it. And they might come

back.

Then you have a real mess on your hands. Kind of like a crowded sheepfold.