

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

The image of Jesus as the shepherd that St. John describes in 10:11-18 has much to say to people like most of us who have never met a shepherd. Our main exposure to sheep is pictures in a child's book or a stuffed animal in a crib. Despite our lack of familiarity with shepherds and sheep, our imagination, coupled with Jesus' explanation, leaves a powerful message for all of us who dare to let him shepherd us. Not only does he have something to say to each of us, but He also offers hope for a society that appears at times to be caught in the brambles.

If you saw the movie *Forrest Gump*, you may recall the scene from Viet Nam in which the platoon lieutenant had been seriously wounded. Forrest Gump saved his life, even though the Lieutenant did not want to be saved. Gump's desire to save was greater than the lieutenant's desire to live. Only later did the lieutenant become grateful for what Forrest had done. A sheep who is trapped in the brambles will squeal and resist when a shepherd attempts to disengage it from danger, but a good shepherd will ignore the squealing and save the sheep. A tired sheep will lay down even in a dangerous place, but the good shepherd will pick up the sheep and carry it to safety. You have, very likely, heard the story of the person who, having gotten to heaven, was shown the life she had lived as a double set of footprints in the sand. She asked, "Why two sets?" and was told that one set was made by Jesus the Shepherd walking alongside her. She responded by asking why there was only one set of prints in places, only to be told that those were the times she was being carried by Christ. Jesus will carry us over the rough spots of doubt and fear and He will lift us out of despair, bringing us to a better place. His caring is more powerful than our own lack of care when it comes to what is best for us. Each one of us matter to Him ... even when He does not matter to us.

You've heard that a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, Jesus was an artist who brought the two mediums together by painting His pictures with words. But He also had to know when He brushed the truth of His message onto the canvas of our hearts, that all analogies are imperfect. And this sheep analogy IS imperfect because there is a major difference between us and sheep. Sheep may squeal. Sheep may rebel. They may be stubborn as any animal can be. But there is a major difference. In the final analysis, we have the God-given ability to say, "No." That's just the way it is when love is offered. The beloved can refuse to accept it. We can allow ourselves to be carried

by Jesus who proclaims Himself as our shepherd, or we can respond with the arrogance of a child who is convinced that he knows a better way. "I don't need your help, thank you very much!" Jesus leaves that choice to us. No real lover forces him or herself on anyone and Jesus is exactly that, a real lover. That is why He comes back after us over and over again, as any good shepherd would. Just because we have been baptized doesn't mean that we don't still foolishly wander into the brambles that allow us to be choked. Just because we have taken part in the Lord's Supper or have sung hymns to His name doesn't exempt us from forgetting the meaning of our rituals and moving off in a direction that conflicts with what they are meant to say. It may be that all we have to do, at least for starters, is to stop our squealing and allow ourselves to be lifted out of whatever it is that entangles us. Only then will we come to understand the image of the Shepherd, an analogy that contains far more truth and wonder than we can imagine.

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