

Last week in the class, *Living Fully, Dying Well*, I gave an assignment full of self-reflective questions. It is something I do with every confirmation class, but it is also a valuable tool to use at any age. One of the questions simply states: I am – and you are invited to fill in the blanks of who you are. In the Gospel of John, Jesus also answers this question identifying himself through a series of “I AM” statements. There are at least seven of them in the Gospel of John. Can you think of them?

I am the bread of heaven. I am the true vine. I am the resurrection and the life.
I am the gate

I am the light of the world. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the good shepherd.

In the reading for today Jesus gives four “I AM” messages. Twice he says, “I am the gate for the sheep”. And twice he declares, “I am the good shepherd”. Jesus declares that he is the entrance into wholeness of life.

In Psalm 23 we also hear the “shepherd” metaphor used for God. Jesus picks up on this metaphor to describe himself, “*I am the Good Shepherd*”. Can you imagine how this would fall on the ears of the Jewish people of that day. Jesus uses “I AM” in at least seven different places in the gospel of John! Do you remember the name I AM from two months ago. When Moses asked God his name, God responded “I AM WHO I AM.” Ex 3:14. By the time of Jesus’, that name had become so sacred that it was never spoken by the Jews. No Jew would use the words “I am”; rather, they would find some other way of communicating the same thought. Therefore, for Jesus to say, “I AM the Good Shepherd”, he would be communicating to any good Jew that he was God! No wonder the political, economic and religious hierarchies of Jesus’ day were offended at Jesus’ words!

Not only was Jesus giving insight to his identity, he was also revealing God’s character as a good shepherd. Today is known in the church as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The readings from Psalm 23 and John 10 and our hymns carry the theme of God as the Good Shepherd. The images that come to our mind are usually peaceful and pleasant ones. We think of sheep safely grazing in green pastures, being led beside still waters. We picture Jesus carrying a lamb in his arms or a sheep across his shoulders. The shepherd imagery in the Bible is meant to conjure up these pleasant images and warm emotions. It’s a very picturesque way of conveying to us the goodness of God, the closeness of his comfort and care. It creates a longing in us to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd. It instills in us a sense of belonging to God’s flock, the church.

But the reality is that, "The life of a shepherd was anything but picturesque. The ancient shepherd of Palestine had to be tough. Shepherds were rough around the edges, cut off from society, spending all their time out on the hills with the sheep. It was dangerous, risky work. Their job was to find water and grazing for the sheep - not an easy task in

the semi-desert. Most importantly, the sheep had to be kept safe from the predators where the sheep walked in “the valleys of the shadow of death.

At night time, they herded them into rock pens with one small opening. There was no gate. The shepherd himself formed the gate by lying across the opening at night. Thus if wild beasts came to attack the sheep, they would have to first attack the shepherd. The shepherd protected his sheep by literally offering his life for them. Thieves and robbers would be unable to approach the sheepfold via the gate, for fear of the shepherd.

The shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus is prepared to face danger and death. Jesus is not saying, “I am the good shepherd because I am *prepared* to lay down my life for the sheep”. Jesus is the shepherd who *will* give abundant life to the sheep *at the expense of his own life*. Life laid down voluntarily and deliberately, rather than taken. His commission was to come offering life. Carrying that through faithfully meant being prepared to die for it. This happened in the light of the larger goal: so that he could take up his life again and then, through the Spirit, spread it over all the world.

Leading, feeding and protecting. Shepherding was not a job for the weak. It was one of the most powerful images used to describe Israel’s experience of Yahweh as protector and provider. In order to rest in the safety and protection of the Shepherd, the sheep must learn the shepherd’s voice, and follow. Jesus tells us how the sheep know and respond to the voice of the shepherd. The sheep’s very existence depends on the shepherd for protection, for sustenance, for guidance. Otherwise, sheep would be incredibly vulnerable. John’s Gospel establishes the image of the shepherd by describing how a shepherd enters the sheepfold, calls the sheep by name, and leads them out to pasture.

When we look at the Psalm, it makes two similarly powerful statements. 1) “*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*”. God provides a place of safety. People are looking for sanctuary. They are searching for a community that embodies the qualities of the shepherd who creates a safe place, a sanctuary. 2) “*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me*”. The psalmist does not promise that God will deliver us from “the darkest valley”. Life will continue to have significantly dark times. And we will face opposition, resistance and even hatred. What the psalmist does promise however, is God’s presence in the midst of our darkest time. We will be equipped and given perseverance to face those dark times.

The words of this psalm resonate with our deepest fears and desires? The 23rd Psalm is frequently read at memorial services, but it speaks of life as well as death, and especially of the Lord of life: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” God provides for us. We know this, but sometimes we forget.

Today’s theme of God/Jesus as the Good Shepherd invites us to reflect on the challenge of recognizing the risen Christ calling our names? If Jesus is to be our Shepherd, our gate, we need to filter out other voices and distractions, and listen for the voice of the shepherd. Then whatever happens in our lives, however tempted we are by subtle or seductive people or media, we will still hear the voice of the shepherd.

Some interesting things are shared about sheep 1) Sheep go astray, but they can return. 2) Sheep hear well, and they know the voice of their shepherd. 3) Sheep know how a shepherd is supposed to act. 4) And sheep grow when they return to the fold regularly and nurture one another.

Just as importantly, these scriptures describe traits of the Shepherd. The Shepherd has a familiar voice and leads the flock where they will be safe and well nourished. The shepherd goes in search of sheep who are lost and brings them home. When they return, the shepherd welcomes them.

We must resist the temptation to expect all the other sheep to be the same as we are. The evils of intolerance to those different can destroy the vision of the church that Jesus is telling us of in John. He is specifically telling us that there are others who are not here with us at the moment. This statement of Jesus that there are other sheep is a reminder to be tolerant of different ways of worshiping, different views on social issues, different traditions. We're called to open our hearts and minds to be greater than that which would divide us and see the love of the shepherd that unites us.

it's not up to us to decide who's in or who's out; this text tells us that Jesus has "other sheep" elsewhere and that he intends to draw them in, too. Charles Cousar writes that "in any case, the flock is not yet finally fixed. It is open-ended. There are always others who recognize the shepherd's voice and enter the fold."

We must be very suspicious of those voices within our culture and even within the church that claim to have an exclusive hold on the truth. How the shepherd must laugh at the sheep, trying to get the other sheep in line. Theologian John Cobb in an article in *The Christian Century* entitled "Being a Transformationist in a Pluralist World" wrote, "*If we trust Jesus Christ as Savior, we have no reason to fear that truth from any source will undercut our faith. Indeed, we have every reason to believe that all truth, wisdom, and reality cohere in him.*" Thanks be to God. Amen.