

Untranslatable Words

By

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John 10:1-16

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me^[a] are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the

sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Sprinkled throughout the year are about 10,000 minor holidays: you might even have a favorite. Like what about National Ice Cream Day—the third Sunday in July? Or a few weeks ago, it was National Pet Day—April 11. Or one of my personal favorites, Talk like a pirate day—September 19, argh!

There are dates that hold important moments, World Aids Day on December 1, and days that serve as serious observations, like Veterans Day on November 11.

Today—boring old April 26 is no exception. Today holds the serious and the sublime—national pretzel day—though I may need to be careful saying that falls in the silly category, after all, we are in Philadelphia and there are serious opinions about pretzels. It is World Intellectual Property Day, and it's also a day marked to remember the Chernobyl disaster.

But today holds one more important title, I know you've been waiting for it all year...drumroll please... yes, it is in fact Good Shepherd Sunday. YAY!

Okay, I'm not seeing the response I was hoping for... maybe that means you were not aware that in some traditions, the fourth Sunday of Eastertide is traditionally Good Shepherd Sunday? Nope, not something you knew about. So let me explain, this is the Sunday when we can celebrate or observe, or maybe a little of both, Good Shepherd Sunday.

You might be wondering why exactly today, midway through Easter, is Good Shepherd Sunday. After all, Easter should be filled with stories of the resurrection: breakfasts on seashores, or earthquakes and empty tombs, great commissions. Instead, it seems as though we

are going backward, away from the resurrected Jesus to an image, a metaphor, a title.

Perhaps I am this excited about Good Shepherd Sunday because, similar to my friends who like pirates and go all in on Talk Like a Pirate Day, I have to admit I love the image. I have somewhere around 100 carved wooden sheep in my office—and yes, I am aware of the irony that I do not know the exact number—but I am just an ordinary Shepherd. I have a good shepherd cross that has been by my door since my second year in college, and the cover art today is from a small watercolor given by a dear friend that I can see when I look over my computer screen. A peaceful image of a young shepherd guiding a flock through the Peruvian mountains.

But, for those who haven't yet learned the good shepherd day cheer, why, beyond my own deep love of sheep and shepherds, why today, and why in the light of the resurrection, would I be talking about a plain old boring shepherd when the image of a king or savior might feel a little more on point?

The image of the Good Shepherd is woven throughout scripture. The psalmists and the prophets, they all use this image easily and effectively to describe God's presence and work among the people.

Jesus uses the image to great effect in the Gospel of John and in his parables. Later in the epistles, the early church leaders use this image again and again.

Even for people well removed from a shepherding background, it's powerful.

Religious educators Sophia Cavalletti and Gianna Goddi spent years perfecting a program called the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. A gifted biblical scholar and theologian, Sofia Cavalletti was involved in ecumenical councils and biblical scholarship and was well respected by Vatican leadership for her thorough work. She was an academic who was pulled into children’s ministry when a friend’s son was failing catechism because he thought it was boring. Sofia, who at that time did not particularly like or understand children, spent three hours with three little boys, and she fell in love. As she learned with them, she and her colleague, gifted educator Gianna, started searching for the biblical narratives that helped children see God most clearly, which image gave them language for building a broad and robust theology—understanding of God. As she asked the question, “What face of God is the child telling us he or she needs to see?” More often than not, it was the good shepherd. After good days and after bad days, sometimes when children couldn’t even say what was happening, they would come back to this image again and again.

It is one of the first stories we teach children. We weave together the pattern of the 23rd psalm, the details of the Parable of the 100 sheep and the one that gets lost, and profound statements from here in John 3, to tell a singular story.

There once was a man who did such wonderful things and said such amazing things that people began to follow him, and as they did, they asked him, “Who are you?” He answered and said, “I am the good shepherd.”

There once was a shepherd who had 100 sheep.

I love the fact that if I even start the sentence, *there once was a shepherd...* there is an immediate reaction among our children. Exasperation, I've heard this one before. Elation, I know this one. Intrigue, will it change... is this the day that the shepherd leaves a sheep behind? *And so, we follow the shepherd and the sheep through green meadows and cool ponds, and places of danger.*

It's an image and a story so powerful, so important that it has woven itself into our very liturgical calendar. It's woven into our space—from the shepherd standing watch over our campus, in the chapel the good shepherd is looking down from a window in the children's chapel, it's even written here in the transept recounting the words of the 23rd psalm, there in the transept, it's woven into our understanding of God.

Today isn't a Pentecost level or even a Gaudete Sunday level—even though it should be—but it's a gift that pops up here on the fourth Sunday of Eastertide, right in the middle.

Today, we listen as Jesus talks about himself, early in his ministry, way back in chapter 3. Think of it like a flashback episode in a good drama. In the gospel of John, he doesn't tell a parable about a shepherd; no, he claims the mantle for himself, "I am the good shepherd." I appreciate that when he started with the gate imagery, everyone was confused, and he went a little more concrete. As an educator, I give him 10 out of 10.

But really listen to what Jesus is saying here about himself.

Jesus is declaring I know you: I know my sheep and my sheep know me. I call my sheep by name. *With a flock of billions, that's a bold statement, and yet. Isn't it just as strange to hear the promise that*

when we hear that voice, we gather, we don't scatter in fear, but rather we come together.

Jesus says I am with you: *he is the gate that hems us in as night falls, holding vigil when we cannot. He is the one who leads us out when day breaks, and whether we know the way or not, he is with us, rain or shine.*

He says I am in it: I am more than just a hired hand who has a few hours to give. NO, I am the one who knows the sheep, I am the one who lay my life down for my sheep, I am *the one who will defend you from the wolves.*

For all the things this passage says about who Jesus is, it also says something equally important about who God believes us to be. You are not just any sheep; you are mine, you are my sheep.

Have you watched children as they start to explore new spaces? When they have that moment, just a little far off, and suddenly there's a trip or a fall, and they immediately look back and need to see you, they need to know that their grown-up is close by. They need to see your reaction; they need to see that you are there and they are safe. They are so bold when they know someone is there to catch them.

I think maybe that's why the good shepherd shows up here in the 4th Sunday of Eastertide. It is a pastoral promise and reminder of God's presence as we live out the Easter commissions

Think of the early church described in Acts. They were trying to work out what they were going to do. How they were going to live in a world after Jesus had ascended. They were living in a place of

persecution and ridicule. They had to make the decision to go out each day. Like a strange little flock, they did just that. Their places of danger were not some far-off place, rocky terrain; their wolves didn't come with sharp teeth and high ears. No, they had to walk into the world each day, a testimony. They worshipped each day, and they didn't scatter, as they lived as witnesses of the flock Jesus called together.

It reminds me of the children's book Psalm 23 illustrated by Tim Ladwig that recites that ancient psalm, showing children walking to and from school in a large city. The good shepherd is present in 1000 different details. Their valleys are made by skyscrapers, their meadows are parks with basketball hoops.

Those early Christians lived with the assurance that their shepherd had not abandoned them, that he was with them. Some two thousand years later, can we be so bold?

In a few moments, we are going to read Psalm 23 as our statement of faith. Yes, the confessional heritage of our church is profound, a gift to help us find words to describe God and our understanding of the world, and yet today, in a world that sometimes feel spinning out of control, in a week that has been punctuated by acts of violence that break hearts and communities, that make us want to throw our hands in the air and cry out how long. I want us to return to a declaration of faith that has been spoken by the faithful for thousands of years. An assurance and a reminder of a 'face of God we sometimes need.'

As we read or recite together, listen for the fourth verse. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

We can get into a debate about the correct translation, but the fourth verse includes two important things. First, a hapex legomena—a word that only exists once, right here, this one place, in scripture: צלמות (Tsal mavet), a word we don't really know how to translate—we call it the shadow of death, but it could also be the deep darkness, or overwhelming darkness, or something else entirely. To be honest, I love the fact that we don't have a perfect word for it; there is a grace in its untranslatability. You know what צלמות means to you. I know that each of you has faced that shadowy valley in a different way, and each of us has a different name for it. I imagine if we paused, many of us could show the scraped hands and beat up knees that come from trying to make it through those hard places, those places where there is danger, where familiar things are hidden behind clouds, those places where evil becomes palpable. It's not some rocky mountain side, but places that are familiar to us. It's the hallways of a school when the cruel words won't stop. It's the parking garage outside the hospital, where you sit, uncertain if you can go back in again. It's a phone call with an old friend trying to figure out how you keep talking with one another after that fight. It is this morning, waking up to more news of more violence, and wondering what on earth we can do? It's the deep breath you can't quite take while you wait for another shoe to fall, It's looking at a world that feels filled with more danger than safety, and although I cannot know your צלמות, I've shared that feeling deep in my gut when the shadows seem stronger and the evil a little too close, and I want to freeze or run back, or just hunker down behind a rock.

But friends, it's here in the fourth verse, the center of the psalm that something changes. It's here in the place of danger the dialogue shifts—we say *you are with me*. The psalm shifts from the third

person shepherd, to the personal, to the intimate, YOU. It's not a shepherd who is with me, but that *you* God are with me.

Just as profound as Jesus saying I am the good shepherd. It is the opportunity we have to answer, you are with me.

That changes everything, and it demands everything. Like those early Christians, we don't have the luxury of hiding out, of folding back, of trying to say "peace out" when we see this shadowy place ahead. We have to face it. We have to walk into it. We are going to trip, and we are going to fall, and you can be certain that I will join you behind that rock for a few hours. But in a world that sometimes seems too messy or even too evil, we are there because of the one who leads us, who guides us. He is with us, tripping, falling, and finding us behind rocks, because he is the Good Shepherd calling us out from our hiding and is holding off the wolves, not because he demands us follow, but he is there because he loves us.

In a few weeks, we'll end the Sunday School year telling the story of the good shepherd again. This time to our three-year-olds. There will be a field of green felt, and tiny sheep will follow as the shepherd makes his way. Inevitably, one of those sheep will be lost in the place of danger. But the good shepherd will not leave him behind. The good shepherd will make his way and find that missing sheep and lead him home again.