

Jesus the Good Shepherd – it’s an incredibly comforting image of Jesus. Judging by the sheer number of renditions I’ve seen, Christian artists love it. Almost every single church I have been in (especially if they have a school, preschool, or nursery) has a picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd somewhere in the building (I took a stroll through the building this week and I found three of them here at St. Paul’s). It is an image that I’m guessing most of you recognize and have seen before (even if you didn’t grow up going to a church) – you’ve got this kind looking, bearded man, in a white gown, holding a little white lamb in his arms, or thrown over his shoulders, while a flock of fluffy sheep peacefully graze on a verdant hillside in the background.

Here’s the deal: I’ve got a slight critique of that particular image, it’s not that big of a deal, but...

Maybe you have thought this through, maybe you haven’t.

Those big, puffy, and fluffy white sheep... yeah, they live in Scotland, not Israel. Sheep in Israel are not nearly as fluffy and white. Their wool coats are quite a bit thinner and come in shades and spots of brown and black and tan because, well...

Those verdant, lush, carpet of green grass landscapes are also from Scotland, not Israel. No, instead of grass you find rocks, sand, cliffs, and caves with random bits of vegetation growing wherever it can. The sheep need to be colored black, tan, and brown because those same landscapes are prowled by all sorts of predators and the sheep need to blend in.

Why do I care? Well, to understand what Jesus means when he calls himself the Good Shepherd, to understand what David means when he calls the LORD his shepherd in Psalm 23, you need to understand what shepherding was like in Jesus’ time and in David’s part of the world.

The Scottish theologian George Adam Smith, who wrote an entire book on entitled *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, put it this way: “Judea, indeed, offers as good ground as there is in the entire East for observing **the grandeur of the shepherd’s character**. On the boundless Eastern pasture, so different from the narrow meadows and dyked hillsides with which we [the Scottish people] are familiar, **the shepherd is indispensable**. With us [the Scots], sheep are often left to themselves; but I do not remember ever to have seen in the East a flock of sheep without a shepherd. In such a landscape as Judea, where a day’s pasture is thinly scattered over an unfenced tract of country, covered with delusive paths, still frequented by wild beasts, and rolling off into the desert, **the man and his character are indispensable**. On some high moor, across which at night the hyenas howl, when you meet him, sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, armed, leaning on his staff, and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one of them on his heart, you understand why the shepherd of Judea sprang to the front in his people’s

history; why they gave his name to their king... why Christ took him as the type of self-sacrifice.”

In Scotland, and in many artists’ renditions of the Good Shepherd, the shepherd could walk away from his flock and they would be just fine – lots of grass to eat, water to drink, not a threat on the horizon.

In Israel, in real life, the shepherd is indispensable – if he walks away the sheep are in trouble. They could get lost, fall into a pit or snare, be attacked by any number of wild animals on the prowl, looking for an easy meal.

The shepherd David had in mind when he wrote the 23rd Psalm, the shepherd Jesus had in mind when he said, “**I am the Good Shepherd**,” wasn’t that kind looking, clean, well-manicured man in many paintings. He was a blue-collared warrior who could never let his guard down, whose job meant guiding his sheep in all kinds of weather through rough terrain, and when necessary, defending his sheep from lions and bears and hyenas and snakes. He’s tan, he’s dirty, he’s armed for battle.

That friends, that shepherd, is the image that flashed through David’s mind as he wrote the words, “**The LORD is my shepherd**” – a shepherd who is indispensable. Without him, the sheep are in trouble.

I hope I haven’t burst anyone’s bubble this morning. If you want to keep picturing Jesus the Good Shepherd as those kind, nursery pictures of Jesus imagine, there is nothing wrong with that. Certainly the peace and tranquility of those pictures portrays some very important Biblical truths about the peace and tranquility because of everything Jesus has done for us.

But I also think that if you spend some more time with me this morning (and throughout the week) thinking about this alternate image of our Good Shepherd (the one where he is a little bit more intimidating and vigilant rather than peaceful and tender), you might find that it ends up being just as, if not more meaningful and comforting, because it that intimidating and vigilant shepherd has some wonderful implications for your life.

Allow me to explain.

Real life, as we experience it, has a whole lot more in common with those rocky, predator-strewn hillsides in Israel than the fenced in, rolling-green pastures of Scotland.

Think for just a minute about all of the dangers of daily life. Turn on the local news at 9 and on a daily basis you can be reminded about just how dangerous living in this world is – drugs, abuse, unrest, violence, natural disasters. I just heard on the radio the other day that one out of every two women and one out of every three men will get cancer in their life time – add in all those beauties like Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, heart disease, and diabetes, and the death rate in this world (regardless of the advances in modern medicine) is still one-for-one –

everyone born will die of something, somehow, and chances are pretty good that along the way it is going to hurt you and those who love you quite a bit in the process.

Add on top of the physical dangers we face the psychological pitfalls of life – all of those very real emotions, worries, and anxieties that threaten to beat us down just as brutally as any physical malady; those incredibly hurtful words your classmate said to you or about you; that spoken or unspoken pressure to measure up, and figure out life, and keep it all together as an employee, as a husband, as a mother, as a teen; the frustrating living-decay of your body as age makes everything harder, more painful, and more daunting.

I could go on and on but I don't think I need to give you a lesson in all the things that make you worry, make you anxious, make you stress, make you afraid – no, your own minds are perfectly capable of coming up with those lists on your own.

And friends that's just the physical and psychological dangers of this world. I haven't even begun to talk about the spiritual dangers we face on a daily basis – how the devil and his minions are prowling around like lions looking for someone to devour. He's like a lion stalking a gazelle, just waiting for you to put your head down, to get busy, to slip up, to have a moment of weakness, he's just waiting for the perfect opportunity to pounce – to lead you into whatever sin it is that he knows is your area of weakness, to whisper the exact right lie at the exact right time to get you to do or say or think *again* what you know you should not be doing, saying, and thinking. And then the moment he's pounced and tripped you up into some sin, he is right there planting the seeds of doubt – doubts about God, about what the Bible says, about his promises and his power and his love and his forgiveness and his very existence.

Are you beginning to see why I would suggest that the image of a weathered, armed, and vigilant defender-of-the-flock shepherd is perhaps more meaningful and comforting than the clean-shaven, peaceful-looking shepherd?

Just like those sheep in Israel, in this world we need the former more than we need the latter. For us, in this world, a good, a strong, a fiercely-protective and attentive shepherd is indispensable. He's not some luxury we could do without for a time. We *need* him every second of every day, standing on that hilltop looking out over us, watching our backs, making sure we don't wander too far, keeping predators at bay.

Or to use the words of David (a man who knew about shepherding) in Psalm 23:

Without our shepherd, we would very quickly become aware of just how much we are lacking – just how incapable we are to defend ourselves physically, emotionally, spiritually. But with him we lack nothing. He knows where those few

and far between oases of green grass and fresh water are found. He knows which paths are the right ones and which ones lead to desert and danger. He is right there by our side when life gets dark and dangerous – his strength and his skill and his vigilance will protect us. He is following close behind, doing his job: leading, refreshing, guiding, and defending us.

And the beauty of the Bible, the beauty of Psalm 23, the beauty of Good Shepherd Sunday is that what we need, we have, in abundance in Jesus. As our Good Shepherd, Jesus is that weathered, armed, and vigilant defender-of-the-flock.

Remember today friends that we have a Shepherd who is completely dedicated to defending and delivering his flock from every danger – physical, psychological, and spiritual. We have the Good Shepherd, who along with leading, refreshing, guiding, and defending was also willing to lay down his life for his sheep – dying in our place so that we could escape the jaws of the lion – the consequences of sin.

I'm not suggesting that we form a mob this morning, go take down the pictures of peaceful Good Shepherd Jesus, grab some paints from the Kindergarten room, and make Jesus look a little tougher. Jesus as our Good Shepherd can and should bring a deep realization of peace – but let's not forget that the peace he brings comes through a dark and dangerous and very real battle with sin, death, and the power of the devil – a battle our Shepherd willingly took on for us – a battle he won on his cross and in his empty tomb – a battle whose effects are still being felt, and will be felt until we dwell in the house of the Lord forever – and make no mistake about it, because of our Good Shepherd, that is exactly where we are being led.

The safe, green fields of Scotland will come at the end, when we are dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. But until we get there, we need a defender. We need a protector. We need a shepherd who would be willing to sacrifice himself to get us there. And in Jesus, our Good Shepherd, we have exactly what we need.

Amen.