

“The Lord is my shepherd...” It’s the one psalm that even people who don’t know any psalms probably know. Out of all 150 psalms this is the one that people know best. Most people can even make a stab at singing it! And that’s not bad for a poem that was already pushing a thousand years old when Jesus was born! After all this time, this psalm is still a beloved and regular part of both Jewish and Christian worship.

The writing of psalm 23 is attributed to King David himself, who, of course, was a shepherd himself in his youth. Jesus grew up knowing these words, written by his own ancestor, and perhaps this very psalm was one of the influences that prompted him to use the metaphor of the shepherd in his teaching.

The land where David and Jesus both grew up had two very distinct regions: the coastal areas and the highlands. Near the coast, where it’s warm and fertile, the people made a living as fishermen and farmers. The hill country is rocky and wild, and people there relied on the only animal that could take the weather and the rough ground and provide a steady supply of milk and wool. Their flocks were small, and very domesticated – a part of the family. A shepherd would know every individual animal in his flock, usually by name, and the sheep knew exactly who they belonged to and who cared for them.

Sheep depend on being part of a group. They aren’t built to do battle with bigger, fiercer animals, and their lives depend on staying close to one another for warmth, security and protection. And ferocious wild animals and harsh weather were not the only dangers for the sheep. They were a popular target for thieves

as well, people who were not at all interested in their welfare, but only in using them for their own benefit.

Because being part of the flock is how they survive, sheep know exactly who belongs to that flock – including the humans, who protect them in the dark and the wilderness, look after them when they are hurt or weak, and lead them to where the good food is.

When you pull it apart like that, the image of the good shepherd, caring for his sheep and protecting them from danger and evil, works really well as a metaphor for our own lives, and our need for protection from perils, for comfort, for belonging. Perhaps that's why people have always loved Psalm 23: at a deep level of understanding, without having to spell it out for ourselves, it describes our own lived experience.

In this morning's gospel reading, Jesus used this familiar image to describe his relationship with us – he is the good shepherd. Then he extends it in a way that his readers would understand easily, but which sounds odd to us, when he talks about recognizing and following the one voice out of all others, and when he talks about himself being “the gate.” To make sense of that, we need to know something more about shepherding in biblical times.

Shepherds typically led their flocks into the open country, looking for good green pastures and safe, fresh water, both of which were a little sparse. When night began to fall, they might be too far out to get back to the protection of their own enclosures, but it was very dangerous to spend the night out in the open. Because of this, there were shelters dotted all over the hill country.

The shelters were usually hollowed out spaces with some natural protection on one side, such as a hillside. Rocks would be gathered and piled up around them, to form rough walls to make a safe space, usually big enough to accommodate four or five small family flocks at a time.

The shepherds would lead their little flocks into the fold to keep them safe at night. In the morning, they would lead their flocks out by calling to them, and the sheep would recognize the voice of their own shepherd and follow him. Sheep are not the smartest of creatures, but they're smart enough to recognize who is looking after them, and they're smart enough, most of the time, to stay close to that person and not wander off.

These overnight shelters were really important: they were safe spaces, with walls for protection, but there was no gate between the walls. Once the sheep were in, the shepherds would settle down for the night in that open space between the walls, blocking it completely. Not only could the sheep not wander out, but nothing and nobody could get in without waking up the shepherds. Thieves and bandits and wolves weren't going to get away with climbing over the shepherds who were guarding the entrance.

So, during the most dangerous hours of darkness, the shepherd protected the sheep by making himself the gate that kept all harm away from them, and in the morning, the shepherd called to them, and they followed because they knew his voice. The shepherd was both the gate and the voice that the sheep would follow.

The sheep couldn't stay in the shelter all the time. They had to leave it to find food, and to live their lives. The safety of the fold was good, but it couldn't

sustain life. Perhaps the sheep didn't always want to leave the fold – one of the Greek words used in this passage implies that the shepherd might have had a bit of a battle some mornings getting them up and moving. And that part of the metaphor probably works better for people than sheep! Our shepherd wants us to have ***abundant*** life, not just an existence, and for that, we need to follow the shepherd out into the world.

But hearing the voice of our shepherd is not always easy. There is so much other noise around us, competing with it. Our world is full of dangers and misleading and distracting voices—the ‘thieves’ who want to take us away from our shepherd by promising us a different kind of abundance. The temptation to follow them is difficult to resist, but at the same time, fearing the world too much, staying in our shelters, robs us of the abundant life that our shepherd wants us to enjoy.

All of these thoughts are conjured in our minds when we say the familiar words of Psalm 23, and at a very deep level, in our hearts and souls, we know what it all means. Our shepherd leads us into green pastures, beside the still waters, and restores our souls so that we walk the paths of righteousness. Even in the darkest of times, our shepherd protects us, nourishes us, and comforts us. And the goodness and mercy of our shepherd will always be there.

Amen.