

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they might have life and have it abundantly. I am the gate of the sheep.”

Welcome to Good Shepherd Sunday. It is one of the more beloved Sundays in the Church Year, a Sunday of little lambs and green pastures, of going out and coming in, of bringing those who have strayed back into the arms of a loving God. What’s not to like about it?

Trust me to find its dark side.

I was in the spring of my second year of seminary. I had been assigned to do a sermon on the Good Shepherd texts in my preaching class. As a lover of wolves, the prospect delighted me. I was a much angrier person in those days; indeed, one of the reasons I was in seminary was the same reason that Mary Magdalene was with Jesus: to be healed of the demons that beset women who are born into a man’s world, the rage from being disciplined by men who are themselves in need of discipline. As I said to a powerful male friend, “You have no idea what it feels like to be considered ontologically inferior.” Or consider today’s epistle, “If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.”

To suffer injustice with grace may be a heroic act for a man. For a woman, it is simply doing her duty. What credit is that, Peter?

Because all this so confused me at the time, I wanted to shake things up a bit. The wolf is not the enemy, I said. The real enemy is not knowing how to live with danger. As beings domesticated by civilization, we have lost the ability to see what's up, giving us a certain affinity with domestic sheep who have lost the instincts and the skills to deal with predators. Wild sheep can and do dispatch wolves with sharp hooves and horns. If anyone ultimately suffers from the predatory world, it's the poor wolves, rib thin and scarred by their many encounters with the prey that got away.

As one discovering a call to a theological vision informed by nature, as one finding God in the amazing, interconnected world of creation, soon to go to Alaska and be transformed by a wilderness, I will confess that I got a little carried away by my critique of domestic sheep that afternoon.

Still, most of my classmates, who were also discovering themselves, gave me the benefit of the doubt. Of course, the God who loves all of creation loves wolves as much as sheep. The Good Shepherd might be less about protecting sheep than about revealing broken relationships, about what happened when thieves, bandits, or wolves were allowed to indulge their appetites unchecked and we were foolish enough to believe them.

Checks and balances. The gate. The law. Justice. Nature is pretty just. It is humanity who has perfected crime.

It was at this point that the single dissenter stood up and announced that I was unequivocally and entirely full of it. I had no idea what I was talking about. He did.

He was a sheep rancher in Wyoming. Unlike me, he had seen wolves in action. They were nothing but ruthless killers.

And so, I wanted to tell him, were men.

But because I didn't want this aggressive ram to bully and vilify my inner wolf, we simply glared at one another across the room.

The word "mansplaining" wouldn't come into the lexicon for another dozen years.

Still, that day, thanks to Jesus my Good Shepherd, I learned some of the most important lessons in my life: the Bible comes not in support of our individual agendas, but to expose and question them. And obedience is not mindlessly doing what I am told, but mindfully listening to all I hear and choosing to follow the voice that leads me into life. Because some voices will lead me into death.

I am the gate of the sheep, says Jesus. The one who does not enter by the gate is a thief and a bandit.

A thief takes goods and money for which he has not worked. He plunders lives he has not cared for. He terrorizes us into submission.

At this moment, millions of Americans are struggling to make ends meet. Young people cannot afford a home. Food prices go up every day. And we're the lucky ones. In Gaza, Ukraine, Iran, Lebanon, and Sudan, our neighbors live under the shadow of bombs.

Meanwhile, writes Theo Baker in *The Atlantic*, last year, “the value of public companies based in [and around Silicon Valley California alone] was \$23 trillion—greater than the GDPs of the United Kingdom, Germany, India, and the entire continent of Africa combined.”¹

Something has taken over our sheepfold. And it’s not wolves.

So now we come to yet another one of those historical “coincidences” which keep this little theologian up at night: much of our modern, runaway, global, imperial capitalism began in a literal sheepfold. The Enclosure Acts (roughly 1750–1860) legally transformed common, communal agricultural land in Britain into privately owned, fenced-in farms. Wool was big business and the masters’ sheep needed space in which to safely graze. By privatizing land, this process increased agricultural efficiency but displaced small farmers. These displaced rural workers were forced into cities, providing the massive labor supply required for the industrial revolution.

Far from being a place of safety and care, the sheepfold turned an entire population into hired hands. The hired hands are the villains of next year’s portion of the Good Shepherd gospel. You can certainly see how they might not care about their masters’ sheep.

The just economy gives life.

¹ Theo Baker “The Stanford Freshmen Who Want to Rule the World,” April 24, 2026

The unjust economy steals and destroys life.

It's amazing to read all this in the Bible. It's amazing that a sweet passage about sheep could harbor so much.

Like the thief and the bandit, the relentless pursuit of wealth does not care what it does to others. Once it has devoured not only all the wolves but also the sheep, the forests, the pollinators, the fish and the birds, it will devour us as well. The natural world exists to give us life in abundance, but once it is gone, so are we.

And in this way, we creep closer to the mystery of Easter and what the path to new life really looks like. These teachings are only partially about gates, sheepfolds, shepherds and their flocks. They are also about two ways of being in the world: the way of giving and the way of taking, the way of nature's law and the way of human self-interest.

We are surrounded by danger says John's gospel, but there is a way out. Jesus is that way. Jesus is the gate.

Jesus does not come to turn our eyes toward heaven. Jesus comes to turn our eyes toward healing a hurting earth. Jesus didn't generate twenty-three trillion dollars of private income in a once fertile valley now paved over by cement. He turned water into wine, cured anyone who asked, fed 5000 people with five loaves and two fish, walked on water, stilled a storm by telling it to be quiet, gave a person blind from birth their sight, and raised a man four days dead. He described himself with a series of "I am" statements: I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the gate

of the sheep, I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the way, the truth, and the life, and I am the true vine. If Jesus can be all that, so, he implies, can we.

Jesus lives out every one of his teachings. He will be eaten like a lamb, chewed like bread, and he will die, but like the healthy ecosystem he created with his Word, he will not stay dead. He will descend into the earth, aerate it, open its clods and rise to life again, or as he says later in this chapter, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” He is saying to us, “Don’t fight against the world and each other. Learn God’s ways. Give yourself to the ebb and flow of life and though you may seem to die, you will not, for if you follow the good shepherd willingly, you will rise to new and wiser life.”

This, my friends, and much to my delight and surprise leads us directly to what the doctrine of the Trinity truly teaches. God is not a chain of command and obedience, but a living relationship between equals: a parent, a child, a spirit of life, all three unique beings, but inseparable one from the other.

As I sit with the image of Jesus as gate, as shepherd, with Holy Spirit as wind and air, with God as gatekeeper, I move from a world of work and productivity toward one of reciprocity. When I am a true shepherd, I cherish my flock. They are my life, not my livelihood. I care for them. They care for me. My dogs and I we

comfort them. To live with a flock is to learn to live by nature's rules and to come and go through God's gate of life.

Jesus reminds us that life is a threshold, not a possession, a journey, not an accumulation. There is a good way to live and a harmful way to live. The earth is the gift of God. Like the early Christians in our reading from Acts, we really do hold it all in common until our "betters" come along and take it away. All who live on earth, both human and non-human, have a right to the food, shelter, and medicines that earth provides for free.

The secret of good governance is learning not how to accumulate, but how to share. And if we do, we will live forever.

Go for it. Amen.