

The Good Shepherd

The Art and Architecture of Faith, Part 3

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

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Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ²Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

⁵The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

John 10:1-6, 11-16

“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. 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.

In his column “On Language” William Safire once wrote about cowboys and shepherds, comparing the role they play in the American psyche. Because of the different nature of their animals, cattlemen and shepherds have a completely different world view. He noted that cattle need wide-open public space to roam and forage, and as the American West was settled, cowhands just rounded the cattle up yearly and drove them to market. Sheep, on the other hand, need protection from coyotes, and shepherds have to build fences and daily defend their flocks.

Making these comparisons, Safire went on to suggest that the cowboy won in our nation’s consciousness as the emblematic, rough-hewn vocational symbol. He wrote: “America’s self-image was the cowboy, not the shepherd; our song is “Don’t Fence Me In,” and not “Sheep May Safely Graze.”¹

It makes sense to me that the cowboy won in our nation’s consciousness – given the number of us, of a certain age, who grew up watching Gunsmoke and Bonanza and John Wayne movie re-runs. We’ve learned to take pride in this wide open country of ours, founded on principles of freedom for all, with a great history of all kinds of pioneers feeling beckoned to discover new and unexplored frontiers. But as people of faith, we will always be people for whom the Shepherd wins over our hearts and minds. And if there were ever a time to lift up the Shepherd in our American psyche, surely it is now.

Less interested in the wide open range, a shepherd, by definition – is a caretaker and a protector. A shepherd is entrusted with the most vulnerable creatures to care for. A lost sheep is a dead sheep, and a shepherd will go to extremes to care for each member of the flock. It was actually the statue of the Good Shepherd on our front lawn that inspired this sermon series on the Art and Architecture of Faith.

One August afternoon, after reading about the horrific magnitude and reach of the clergy abuse scandal in the Catholic church, I headed out of our

¹ William Safire, “Lying in the Weeds,” *New York Times*, 7/30/97

home next door for a walk with our dog. Overwhelmed by what I had just read, I was thinking about how so many of our church members have deep ties in the Catholic church – either having grown up as a Catholic or by various family ties still. I was thinking about how this kind of crisis in one denomination has a negative ripple effect for all Christian congregations, in a time when the religious landscape in our country is undergoing vast changes, including increasing levels of distrust. But mostly, I was thinking about the sheer sadness of how so many children and vulnerable youth have suffered abuse and what a horrific problem it is – not only in religious communities, but also in families, in schools, in neighborhoods, knowing there are more than three million reports of child abuse in our country a year. That's just what is reported.

With all of that on my mind, when the dog and I rounded the corner in front of the church that day, there he was, the Good Shepherd statue on our front lawn and I thought, *that's who we are supposed to be*, people of the Shepherd who care for the least and the lost. That Shepherd on our church's front lawn speaks a bold prophetic word against any form of abuse. We are intended to be people who never take advantage of the weak, the young, the vulnerable. Our calling is always to come to their aid, their shelter and protection. Because that is who God is.

Old Testament Professor, Walter Brueggemann writes about how the "shepherd" had a pastoral role to care for the individual, and also a political role to care for the nation. The shepherd about whom Jeremiah speaks is king, sovereign, lord; a person with great authority, one who directs, and the one to whom others are answerable. The references to the shepherd in our scripture today offer both promise *and* warning. In Jeremiah's time the human kings of Israel had abandoned their shepherding role; for personal gain and power they had destroyed and scattered the flock of Israel.

In contrast to these earthly, political realities, God promised to send a real Shepherd King who would gather the people, and rule over them fairly.

This shepherd would execute justice in the land, would be a bearer of safety and security, and would be concerned about the needs of the people, especially the needs of the poor and vulnerable – the widow and the child.

During Jeremiah's time, when the people were a nation at war, when violence held so many in peril, people of faith learned to call on God as a Shepherd King which gave them encouragement for their present conditions and hope for the future. ² It is from that Old Testament tradition that Jesus says of himself, "I am the Good Shepherd...." Whereas the wolf or the bandit might scatter and harm the sheep, Jesus says, "I gather them, tend them, and love them – to the point that I lay down my life for them."

The bronze shepherd on our front lawn, along with the ewe and the ram, is our visual and visceral reminder of who God is and who we are called to be. That statue has been a prophetic witness for this congregation since 1999, almost 20 years. It was a gift of Jim Mackie's mother, long affiliated with this congregation, in memory of her parents and sister.

A lot of thought was given to the placement of the shepherd, in front of the Education building. It is positioned there as though leading children from their early Christian formation into the center of the life of the church. The ewe and the ram represent the inclusiveness of Christ's flock and are intentionally placed in equal distance behind the shepherd to denote the equality of male and female in the church. And this is my favorite aspect of the gift, because it is so unusual for a major art installation to allow for this. The cast bronze construction of the statuary allows children to climb on the ewe and the ram without danger of damaging the animals.

This statue of the Good Shepherd was always intended to be enjoyed by children who wish to play on the animals, as well as by adults who might consider the meaning of the Good Shepherd in their lives as they rest in the yard on a bench, visit the Chapel Memorial Garden or simply come and go.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 260.

British art historian, Rowena Loverance, has written: “The purpose of Christian art is to deepen our encounter with God. From the tiny to the monumental, from a piece of personal jewelry used for private meditation, to a massive stained-glass window in a great cathedral, the function of Christian art is the same: to catch the imagination, to open the heart and the mind, so that we may better hear the divine promptings.”³

Given the peril that so many vulnerable people face in our world today – from the very young to the very old – I, for one, am grateful that this church’s most visible art installation is The Good Shepherd. He not only stands there, the image of God’s grace and compassion, moving toward the center of our church campus. He is leading us, the members of his flock, the ewe and the ram, in his pathway – to care for the safety and protection and wellbeing of the most vulnerable in our church, the community and the world.

Our church has launched a major capital campaign to renovate and revitalize our church campus. It has been years in the making, following a thorough assessment of the capital improvements needed to make our facilities – safer and more accessible for all our members, young and old and in between. Conversations about these renovations have always included envisioning how our church campus can be best suited to our congregation’s needs for gathering and sending, for Christian nurture here and mission beyond.

Today, after worship, you have opportunity to help us dream about how the percentage of the campaign allocated to mission and outreach will further our Christian discipleship in the community and in the world. Then, in the coming weeks we will be sharing more specific plans for reimagining how our sacred spaces can further our growth as a community of faith.

Today, I am mindful of how all of our efforts to this moment in the life of this church have related to the grace and goodness of God which we experience most profoundly in the company of the Good Shepherd whose

³ Judith Couchman, *The Art of Faith*, p. 4

image stands in front of our children's Education building. "I will gather up my flock," says the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah. "I will bring them into their fold where they will be fruitful and multiple, where they shall not fear any longer, nor shall any go missing." And Jesus himself echoes the prophet saying, "They will know the voice of the Good Shepherd. He will lead them out and they will follow him."

The late Fred Rogers has gotten a lot of attention recently with the release of the documentary and books about his life. A Presbyterian minister, he committed his whole vocation to the welfare and safety of children, and not just for children alone. In his own book on Parenting, Mr. Rogers wrote about how compassionate care for children would benefit all of society. He said, encouraging his adult audience: "Because we were once children ourselves, we have lived through the same early childhood years... we've had children's feelings, but most of us don't have conscious memory of it. We've forgotten what it's like not to be able to reach the light switch. We've forgotten a lot of the monsters that seemed to live in our room at night. We've forgotten how it feels to be in the midst of a temper tantrum. But those memories are still there, deep inside us, and they can sometimes resonate within us from some sight or sound or event. Because we were children once, the roots for our empathy are planted within us. We know what it's like to feel small and vulnerable, powerless, helpless, scared and confused. And it's our empathy that helps us become more sensitive to the needs of others."⁴

You know, our Good Shepherd was a child once, a child heralded in the night and visited by ordinary shepherds. He has empathy for us amid all the dangers of our world, and among the dangers lurking at the door of our individual lives. The Good Shepherd is a representation of God caring for us who sometimes feel small and vulnerable, powerless, helpless, scared and confused.

⁴ Hedda Sherapan, "Think of the Child First," *The Living Pulpit: The Child*, Oct – Dec, 2003, p.7.

The Good Shepherd is a representation of Jesus Christ who is leading us forward in bold new ways to care for the least and the lost. The vision of this church is none other than the mission of the Good Shepherd to give our life away – for the safety, the protection, and the love of the other – the most vulnerable, the most in need.

AMEN.