

**Sheepish**  
**John 10:22-30; Psalm 23**  
**Jennie Clark**



My earliest memory of Jesus comes from my preschool Sunday school class. There I was introduced to Jesus as the Good Shepherd. As a young child, I learned that Jesus loves and cares for me just as the Good Shepherd cares for his sheep.

I treasured the cup that my teacher gave me for Christmas that year. Engraved on this plastic cup was the image of the Good Shepherd, standing with staff in one hand and a lamb in the other. I looked at that image each night before bed, as I brushed my teeth and imagined myself as the lamb in the loving arms of Jesus the Shepherd. What a sweet thought to hold as I drifted off to sleep.

When our daughter was born thirty-three years ago, we received from my pastor and his wife, the framed image of the Good Shepherd that appears on today's bulletin cover. This close up image of the shepherd and the lamb is quite different than the image I cherished as a child.

In this close up image, the expression on the lamb's weary, wooly face and the tenderness of the shepherd's embrace touch me deeply. What especially tugs at my heart is seeing the wound in the hand that protectively cradles the lamb, revealing this shepherd to be the risen Jesus, who lays down his life for the sheep.

The tenth chapter of John's gospel follows the story of Jesus restoring sight to a blind man, which causes quite a controversy. People are divided as to what to make of this miraculous healing. Some wonder out loud if Jesus might be the Messiah. And others are dismissive and critical of such a suggestion.

They hold fast to their certainty that they have a grasp on God, leaving no openness to being grasped by God. They are the ones who become indignant when Jesus judges them for their blindness, for not recognizing God's power at work in the world through him, power that is happening right in front of them when a blind man's sight is restored. (*John 9:39-41*)

In John 10:1-21, Jesus continues his response to those who dismissively question his identity. Here he speaks at length about himself as the Good Shepherd and of his sheep, who hear his voice and follow him. The tension between Jesus and his opponents continues in today's gospel passage. Those who oppose Jesus boldly

confront him saying, *“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”*(v.24)

I imagine Jesus rolling his eyes at this point. He tells his opponents that he has already made visible who he is, through the works of power he does in his Father’s name. Jesus know that those demanding a plain answer are more interested to know his *title* than to know *him*. The problem is that Jesus’ identity cannot be contained in a title. Experiencing God’s amazing love, grace, and power that are becoming accessible through Jesus, is how his identity is more fully revealed.

So, Jesus uses the analogy of the shepherd and sheep to make his point. The sheep know and trust the shepherd, not for any rational or intellectual reasons, but simply because they experience and respond to the shepherd’s caring and protection. It is the same way a baby comes to trust their mother as she tenderly holds, feeds and sings lullabies over him or her.

Last Sunday elders and pastors stood on holy ground with youth who have journeyed through the confirmation process this year. We had the sacred privilege to hear them share their experiences of Jesus through the twists and turns of the path they are on, the path that lead them here today to profess their Christian faith before the congregation.

We were deeply touched by their vulnerability as they talked openly about their questions, hurts and struggles that they have already encountered in their young lives. The kind of things that would shake anyone’s faith to the core. They have wrestled with some harsh realities this year, for which there are no easy answers. Yet, though they continue to wrestle with these hard things, they have heard above noise of all that would distract them, the voice of the Good Shepherd calling them by name to follow him.

They bore witness to us that by leaning into their faith through their struggles, that they encountered Jesus through the love and support of friends and mentors at Westminster who came alongside them. Their fellow sheep in the fold of their class helped them to hear the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who assures them they are loved and secure in his arms.

They experienced the good news Jesus offers to all struggling with fear, pain, doubt, or hopelessness when he says: *27My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.* Jesus assures us that the Good Shepherd will not abandon the sheep even when, not if, but when the circumstances of life cast shadows of doubt over our ability to trust the Shepherd.

Christian author, Lauren Winner, writes honestly about how doubt is a constant companion to faith when she says:

*“In moments of strained belief of not knowing where or if God is, it has also seemed that the Christian story keeps explaining who and where I am, better than any other story I know . . . Some days I’m not sure if my faith is riddled with doubt or whether, graciously my doubt is riddled with faith. And yet . . . I continue to keep living in a world that I know*

*to be enchanted, and not left alone. I doubt. I am uncertain; I am restless, prone to wander. And yet glimmers of holy keep interrupting my gaze.”<sup>1</sup>*

The risen Jesus among us is a holy visible reminder that when all seems hopeless, the Good Shepherd will not abandon his sheep. I have first hand experience of that truth through the challenges and doubts in my own life, when the wounded hands of the risen Shepherd reach for me and tenderly embrace me. Again and again I continue to learn anew to listen for his voice, and follow him, for he is the One who knows the way out of the tomb.

I leave you with these words from Steve Garnaas-Holmes that were shared in a devotion I read this week. They are words of comfort and charge for sheepish folks like us.

*Follow the voice that knows you.  
Ignore the voices of expectation,  
that try to fit you to their liking.*

*The Beloved doesn't demand  
but accompanies, shares your burden,  
leads you to green pastures, restores your soul.*

*The Beloved walks with you  
even through darkest valleys  
toward richer love, deeper life.*

*Ignore the voices of despair or fear,  
voices of blame or bitterness,  
that can only defend you by hurting others.*

*Follow the voice that draws you  
more clearly to who you are created to be,  
the voice that is life-giving.*

*Follow the voice that offers love, joy, peace,  
patience, kindness, generosity,  
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

*Stop and listen. Be silent and listen  
in long stillness. Wait with all the voices  
for the One who stays with you. Sit with it.*

*And then follow.<sup>2</sup>*

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Laura F. Winner, “Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis”, p. xiv

<sup>2</sup> Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, [www.unfoldinglight.net](http://www.unfoldinglight.net)