



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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My Favorite Bible Metaphor

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Scripture is a treasure trove of literary genres. Novellas, poetry, wisdom literature, history, and parables spark our imagination of what the writer, and the Holy Spirit, wants us to know about God and ourselves.

Throughout scripture, metaphors abound. A metaphor puts one idea alongside another, or has one object stand in for another, and allows the literary concoction to brew new insights.

One metaphor appears more commonly over the centuries of writers and editors, than any other, pointing towards God...the Good Shepherd.

Louise's reading from the prophet Ezekiel warns the rulers, who were to shepherd to God's people, of God's plan to push them aside with "I myself will...rescue my sheep...I will bring them out...I will feed them."

Jesus fulfills this prophecy centuries later. The Pharisees confronted Jesus for healing a man born blind, defying their desire to control who is in and who is out. Before I read his words, please pray with me.

Shepherd God, call us by name, startle us from those voices that distract. In the quiet of your care, feed us your words of goodness and mercy and justice that we live in your care all our days. Amen.

Listen for God's word as I read from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The 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.

The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as God knows me and I know God. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”

James Rebanks comes from a longline of shepherds in England’s Lake District. Like many who came before him, he dropped out of school at sixteen to the year-round task of tending sheep.

A few years later, he met a woman, now his wife, who insisted he return for the equivalent of a GED in England, and from his talent and persistence, he earned a full scholarship to Oxford University.

Rebanks now tends his beloved flock with a degree in classical literature, births lambs, uploads YouTube videos, bales hay, and writes.

Listen to this excerpt of his memoir, *The Shepherd’s Life*:

A lamb has gone missing. Its mother is agitated. She runs up and down the fence. I left them, hours ago, safe and well, mothered, and now it is gone. There are no clues. I ride around the field, checking the other mothers haven’t stolen it or taken it by mistake. They haven’t. I check the becks in case it has fallen in and drowned. We try to keep ewes and young lambs away from the becks, but it isn’t always possible. I

hate losing a lamb. I check the neighbouring fields. No sign. Then I see it has gotten itself stuck between the trunks of an old thorn tree, about a foot off the ground. It is fine, just squashed and tired. I lift it out and it runs off to suckle its mother. You can lose hours looking for a lamb.¹

Reading his memoir almost exhausted me from his relentless battles against the harsh weather in the Lake District and with the animals' stubbornness.

Shepherding can only be described as grueling labor, not measured in hours, but as a lifestyle devoted to land and creature and weather and trade that keeps you awake at night and fills each hour of the day.

Rebanks claims shepherding is, I quote, "tough (that) work slaps the silliness out of you when you grow up in places like ours."

He then defines the three rules of being a shepherd: "The first rule of shepherding; it's not about you, it's about the sheep... Second rule: you can't win sometimes. Third rule: shut up and go and do the work."

Rebanks learned his trade from his adored grandfather. Field tough and uneducated by our standards, his granddad taught through example and stories, these values:

We don't give up, even when things are bad.

We pay our debts.

We help our neighbours if they need it.

We do what we say we will do.

¹ James Rebanks, *The Shepherd's Life: Modern Dispatches from an Ancient Landscape* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2015) 265.

We don't want much attention...
We are proud of what we do.
We try to be quietly smart.
We take chances to get on.
We will fail sometimes.
We will be affected by the wider world...
But we hold on to who we are.²

Forget anyone of these values, the flock begins to wither, neighbors fall away, trust evaporates, and isolation sets in.

Shepherd extends passion for each creature. And the shepherds' legacy depends upon working towards a vision for the future even though they may not see it unfold for generations within the flock or in their lifetime.

Our Judeo-Christian values teach us that anyone in a position to care for the well-being of a group of people, however vast or modest the scope, is to do so with the heart of a shepherd.

Parents are shepherds for their children; when parents age, children become their shepherds; financial advisors shepherd their client's wealth; doctors and nurses shepherd healing, teacher corral wayward flocks of students, CEOs are shepherds for their corporations; and so forth.

All of us need shepherding. We need *guidance*: someone to help us find the right path or to rescue us when we stray. We need *protection*: someone to warn us of hidden dangers, to shelter us from adversity, and to restore us when we fail. We need *nurturing*: someone to share with us wisdom and truth.³

² Rebanks, *Shepherd*, 42.

³ Guy Sayles, "Preaching Texts for Ordinary Time," *Journal for Preachers* 37, No 4, (2014), 5.

Throughout Israelite history, any leader venerated as one of the greatest was never referred to as a “commander” or “king” or “warrior”, even he distinguished himself in that role. Instead, those deemed righteous in our faith history are described as a shepherd.

The patriarchs, Abraham, Jacob, and Moses all tended sheep. King David, chosen by God as a teen while in a distant field, is called the shepherd king.

Despite this history, the rulers and priest in the 6th century BCE lost sight of those ideals. No doubt, the leaders condemned by Ezekiel never sullied their hands in the sodden wool of a sheep or labored alongside an ewe in birth, but literal, animal husbandry was not the point.

Shepherds are accountable to God for what happens to those in their charge, and the Hebrew Scriptures tell us that God has a particular anger toward self-serving shepherds.

Through Ezekiel, God condemns the leaders for feeding themselves while the people starved. They did not care for the weak, the injured. Because of their greed, the people became targets to all forms of predators inside and outside the nation.

The Israelite people became such easy prey that the Babylonians captured the holy city of Jerusalem and exiled the people.

Consider a contemporary analogy. Imagine if our leaders in Pittsburgh or Harrisburg or Washington focused on their careers by, constantly fighting with each other, skimming from the taxes, funding pet projects, and over taxing us, and ignored caring for the people in the community. Imagine if

their neglect eroded our way of life so that we became vulnerable, divided us with animosity, allowed enemies to rise. To be exiled from our homes, literally banished to a foreign country, seems far-fetched, but the analogy of losing our security is not.

Back to Ezekiel...God was furious.

God had blessed Abraham ages ago, telling him and his descendants to be a blessing to others, liberated the Israelites from slavery, centered them together in love, spoke the truth through prophets of the importance of community, and yet the leaders failed. God now demands justice.

God promises to become the true shepherd. "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured... I will provide for. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God."

The Good Shepherd is never afraid to get into the muddiness of our lives, throw out the corrupt, and drag us back to the loving community where we belong.

Ezekiel dispels the image of the gentle shepherd in a lily-white costume carrying a lost sheep back to a bucolic field, dispensing grace. We all carry this image from childhood stories, but that is only half of the metaphor.

Jesus, the embodiment of grace, also demands fierce justice. He declares "I am the Good Shepherd" as he confronts the corrupt temple leaders. They refused to care for someone born blind and then rejected such a person healed by Jesus. Blindness stands in for any way someone is deemed different from birth and can be marginalized.

Those leaders behaved as mere hired hands in caring only for themselves and would flee at the prospect of the tough work tend a soul cast into the wilderness by others and to restore a fractured community.

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus will go to all lengths, even lay down his life, to reveal the depth of God's love.

Love comes to us in the form of grace, to forgive and bring us back after we fail, and love fuels the quest for justice for those long denied.

In the words of theologian Jemar Tisby,

Love is the fiery heart, beating at the center of the urgent call for justice for the world. Love is the energizing force of justice that insists on fairness and equity for all. Love is the motivating factor that demolishes any paternalistic attitudes and builds a posture of a humble servant. Without love, there can be no justice.⁴

Today, hereditary kings do not govern us as in the time of Ezekiel, a model de-throned centuries ago. Instead, we fought for self-governing democracy to ensure our collective good.

And in this form of community, as we profess our trust in Christ, we are to be shepherd one another with his care, always accountable to his judgement.

What does his grace and justice look like? Those long denied quality education and housing and health care are

⁴ Jemar Tisby *How to Fight Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2021).

included. Those without voice and vote, would gain a place at the table. In the care of the good shepherd, transgender freely roam with his blessing. We listen to the stories of those long denied justice and ask for their mercy. You can continue the list of what grace and justice might accomplish through and for us.

I know we are tired from the pandemic, and this sounds like exhausting work, being a shepherd.

This is when we turn to Jesus, remembering his care for the least and lost, building one day and one person at a time a more peaceful community. And in living out as he taught, we find the grace to begin again and again.

We find that justice restores the community. And we find rest in his tender care. Our good shepherd promises, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Let me close with Rebanks’ wisdom after a lifetime of shepherding.

There is a thrill in the timelessness of carrying on something bigger than me, something that stretches back through other hands and other eyes into the depth of time...Perhaps no one will care that I owned sheep that grazed part of these mountains in a hundred years’ time. They won’t know my name. But that does not matter. If they stand on that hill (fell) and do the things we do, they will owe me a tiny speck of debt for once keeping a part of it going. I owe all those who came before a debt for getting it this far.⁵

All honor and glory to you, Good Shepherd.

⁵ Rebanks, *Shepherd*, 287.



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