

The Very First Rule of Theology

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I've been here many times. It's the Fourth Sunday of Easter, which offers a powerful Gospel lesson from John 10 – "I am the Good Shepherd", a wonderful theme for this Sunday in the Church Year – Good Shepherd Sunday – and the many beautiful hymns this theme has inspired – hymns like our opener, *The King of Love My Shepherd Is*, and our closer, *The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want*, and some nice hymns that I didn't choose, like *Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us*. I love this Sunday and I love these Lessons. But that doesn't change the fact, as I've confessed many times before, that I know nothing about sheep, and even less, if that were possible, about shepherds. I could fake it, by cracking open my textbooks and spouting off this or that about why sheep and shepherds were important in the life and times of God's people as recounted in the Scriptures. But the truth is that it is not what we know about these images but what we know about God that makes them work. It is our knowledge of God, our experience of God's love, our understanding of God's faithfulness that fill the role of shepherd with the capacity to remind us that we can trust God, that we should trust God, because God won't let us down. God won't run away or be found missing in action when action is needed.

The Old Testament took what was a common fixture on the landscape of a difficult life for folks trying to work the land in the Middle East, with soil that couldn't sustain animals that needed lots of lush grasses for grazing, and then transformed this symbol of scarcity into images that were religiously rich in capturing God's faithful love and our need to trust in God as our good shepherd. Grasses needed for grazing were thin and limited, the soil rocky, the terrain mountainous. If there were a way to capture the toughness required to meet the challenges posed by life in ancient Palestine, sheep and shepherds fit the bill. There are many references to sheep and shepherds in the Old Testament. Ezekiel took these various references to God as shepherd of the sheep, and enshrined them at the center of a hope that looked forward to the coming kingdom where God would embrace and embody this role as the *True Shepherd of Israel*.

Chapter 34 focuses on these images. "*Should not shepherds feed the sheep? But you shepherds of Israel have been feeding yourselves! You have not strengthened the weak. You have not healed the sick. You have not bound up the injured. You have not sought out the lost and found those who had strayed. Thus says the Lord, your God: I myself will search for my sheep and seek them out. I will seek them ... rescue them ... bring them out into their own land ... and feed them with good pasture.... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I will seek out the lost ... bring back the strayed ... bind up the injured ... strengthen the weak ... and feed them with justice*" – a justice that overflows with mercy, a justice that forms the foundation of true peace. This promise created the messianic hope that set the stage for Jesus claiming to be the One sent by God to be this Good Shepherd.

My point is that knowing about shepherds is not the key. Shepherds can be committed or not, hirelings that run away, or conscientious when it comes to caring for the sheep. God takes this common role and fills it with the power of His faithfulness, forming it in a way that becomes a perfect fit for the love that flows from His character and defines the essence of His being. Again, it's not about knowing what shepherds are, but knowing who God is that is the key to why this image is so endearing and revealing. It's the same principle at work that I have repeated several times since Easter with respect to St. John's fascination with "love" in his First Epistle. I am referring here to the passage where John seems to identify God with love in saying that "*God is love*" (1 John 4:7); but it isn't our experience of love, and certainly not the experience of our love, that tells us what we need to know about God. It is our experience of God that tells us everything we need to know about the meaning of love. It is important not to become distracted by the images we use to describe God, by the language we use to talk about God, when it is our primary desire and Scripture's main intent to help us to know God.

John's Gospel is known for the many instances in which Jesus uses a particular phrase as a technical reference, of sorts, which serves as the name of God. In Greek, the phrase is *Ego Eimi*, which is translated *I AM*. The term dates back to the burning bush in Exodus, when God responds to Moses' demand that He identify himself, by telling Moses His name, which is *YaHWeH*, translated into the Greek as *Ego Eimi*, and into English as *I AM* who *I AM*. In John's Gospel there are seven instances where Jesus uses this reference as a way of identifying with a classic Old Testament symbol associated with capturing the essence of God. There is "I am the bread of life" in John 6:35, and "I am the light of the world" in John 8:12, and "I am the true vine" in John 15:1, and "I am the good shepherd" in John 10:11, and "I am the door to the sheep" in 10:7, referring to himself as the gate and gate keeper, the key to enter and the way in. These references lead to Jesus' stronger claims, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" in John 14:6, and "I am the resurrection and the life" in John 11:25.

In most of these instances, John uses ordinary words and roles drawn from everyday life to describe the nature of God's actions, to name the identity of God – such as bread, light, vine, and shepherds, sheep, gate-keeper, vinedresser. The role or image is not God, but it captures something special about God's actions and character, what philosophers call the essence of God's divinity. God is greater than anything we can conceive, greater, of course, than the words we use to describe Him, greater even than such words as Father and Son, greater than our categories of male and female. We must never forget the first rule of theology. *God is categorially unique*. Note that I didn't say categorially unique, since "categorially" is used often for emphasis, in the sense of meaning that God is emphatically unique. But when we are saying something about God, we must keep in mind that God is in a category all by Himself, truly one of a kind, *categorially unique*, different from and greater than everything used to describe and define Him. ***This is the first rule of theology, namely, that God is greater than the words we use to describe Him.*** And yet, what else can we do, except to use words to describe that which is greater

than any of the words – and all of the words – we might use to describe, address, and worship the Great I AM?

What I find even more interesting about the theology we encounter in the Gospel of John is that John takes what is basic to human life, namely, our ability to communicate with words, and uses what is basic about us to convey what is essential about God. Who can forget that powerful prose of John's Prologue? "*The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.*" (John 1:14) The Word becomes Incarnate in Jesus Christ, and the Incarnate Word is the living and unreserved revelation of God. Knowing the secret word is not the key to gaining access to God's power, whether that word is *love*, or *shepherd*, *Father*, or *Son*. Knowing God is the point of using words to express what we've encountered in Jesus, and to share with others what we have come to know about this way to true life.

John's Gospel is very sophisticated when it comes to conveying this profoundly simple rule for talking about God, and it is at play in our classic text identifying Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The Old Testament often referred to God as the Great Shepherd of Israel. John 10:11 stands this language on its head by doing Great one better in calling Jesus the Good Shepherd. Usually, a "great" shepherd would be better than a "good" shepherd, but not with *the Good Shepherd*. Language falls short; and yet, God uses it, and becomes it, transforming it along the way. John is saying that a single word is not enough to describe what we have encountered in Jesus, the Word of God Incarnate.

This living Word needs a story, *his* story, the history of salvation – narrated in the Old Testament, symbolized on the Cross, and embodied in the story of Jesus. That is the Good News of the Gospel, and that is what John is saying in his First Epistle, when he tells us that God is love. "*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God; for God is love.*" But then John goes on: "*God's love was revealed in this way....*" (1 John 4:7-10) In other words, John tells us a story, the story of God sending His son to die that we might find true life through His death, through His love. That's the story we hear proclaimed more fully in John's Gospel.

That's what we hear in this morning's Gospel Lesson. "*I AM the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I am not a hireling, who runs at the first sign of danger. I am the model of what God expects and desires of a good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, and I lay down my life for the life of my sheep.*" (John 10:11, 14) That's who Jesus is; that's what Jesus did; and that's why he's more than the Great Shepherd. He is the Good Shepherd. Because we know this story, because we know the God that his story proclaims and embodies, because of the love that the Good Shepherd so freely gives is ours through the faith we confess and the worship we offer, we can celebrate the life that is ours, given freely as a gift, the self-sacrificing gift that is offered on the Cross, in the bread and the wine, through the fellowship we share ... in Jesus' name. Amen

