

I

It is small wonder that the image of the shepherd was frequently upon the lips of the savior. It was a part of his heritage and culture. Abraham, the father of the nation, was the keeper of great flocks. Moses was tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, when God called him into a special service. David was a shepherd boy called in from the fields to be the King of Israel.

The imagery of the shepherd was also imprinted upon the literature of the day. The 23rd Psalm is frequently referred to as the shepherd psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters."

When Isaiah spoke of the coming of the Messiah he worded it by saying: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd! He will gather his lambs into his arms." Yes, the tradition of the shepherd was very much a part of the heritage of Christ.

This picture comes more clearly into focus in the New Testament. Jesus once told a story about a shepherd who had 100 sheep, but one of them went astray. In our way of thinking a 99% return on our investment would be most desirable, but not this shepherd. He left the 99 to go in search of that one lost sheep. Later, when Jesus was speaking to a great throng of people, Mark tells us that he had compassion upon them because they were "as sheep without a shepherd."

Throughout the Judeo-Christian faith, then, the image of the shepherd has been stamped upon our thinking. In our scripture text for this morning Jesus again taps into this imagery when he refers to himself as the good shepherd. For a few moments this morning, I would like for us to examine together what he had in mind when he described himself in this way.

First, we have a shepherd that is a genuine shepherd. United Methodist Pastor Rev. Larry Daniel, a well-known writer of Civil War novels, tells a story on himself. He says, "I will never forget when I got my wife's engagement ring. I had been saving up money from all of the marriages I had performed to buy an antique musket--an 1864 U. S. Springfield rifle--oh, it was beautiful. Instead I used the money to buy an engagement ring." Greater love hath no man than that. But after I had bought the ring, I said to the jeweler--now, be honest with me. The deal is made. I can't back out of it. Can you really tell the difference between a real one carot ring and some phony thing that I can buy off the shopper's channel on TV?

He said: come around here and look at this, I want to show you something. He put the light on two rings--the one I had just bought and a phony diamond. Then he gave me his jeweler's eyeglass. He said look at this cheap imitation and look at what you just bought and when I did I was amazed. My ring sparkled. The counterfeit was dull and had no luster.

Jesus said: now here are two shepherds. Outwardly there seems to be no difference. The skin of both has been bronzed by the sun and weathered by the wind. They both carry a fleece to keep them warm at night. Both carry a shepherd's crook. But one is a genuine shepherd and the other is a counterfeit. One is a shepherd in his heart; the other is a shepherd for hire.

On an ordinary day you could never tell them apart. But let trouble come. Let a pack of wolves appear and then the difference comes out. The counterfeit runs, because it is

only money to him. He has no ownership. But the real shepherd stays. Jesus said in our text: I lay down my life for my sheep. That is the difference between the real shepherd and the counterfeit.

Here is the good news friends. I don't care how much trouble comes your way; the good shepherd will never leave your side. He will not desert you in times of trial. That is news that will let you get through the night; that is news that will enable you to keep your sanity.

Second, I think that the Good Shepherd knows his sheep. In the middle East I saw several different flocks of sheep all huddled together at a watering hole yet moving around as individual sheep. They all looked alike to me. It was simply a mass of white wool. He wondered how the shepherds would ever separate them out. At the appropriate time, however, each shepherd gave his own unique call, and in orderly fashion the sheep divided. Perhaps that is what the Good Shepherd meant when he said: I know my sheep and my sheep know me.

There is a story of a particular census taker who went to a family to gather information. This was in the mountains and the family was quite poor. He asked the mother how many dependents she had. She began, well there is Rosalie, and Billy, and Lewella, our dog Willie. The census taker interrupted her and said: No ma'am that is not necessary. I just need humans.

Oh, she said. Well, there is Rosalie, and Billy, and Lewella. Rather exasperated, the census taker interrupted her again and said:

No ma'am, you don't seem to understand. I don't need their names I just need numbers. The mother innocently replied: But I don't know them by numbers. I only know them by names.

It strikes me as a rather comforting thought that the great creator of the cosmos knows me by name. He knows my situation. Oh, I know that there are those who scoff that the Great Prime Mover of the universe could also be a caring shepherd. But I simply look to the words of the Good Shepherd: I know my sheep.

About a year ago a murder took place in a small Mississippi town. The neighbors who were interviewed on the news were all shocked. It seems impossible to us that the husband did it they all said. We knew these people. We knew what was going on in their lives. You see, that is the difference between God and us. God knows. We only think that we know.

Jesus said: My sheep know me. The question is: are we attuned to God's special whisper. I suppose all of us have seen the painting done in the 1930's of a dog, looking with a cocked head, at an old RCA phonograph. The name of the painting is the Master's voice. I know that in my life I have not always recognized my master's voice. I have been too busy, too preoccupied, too self-centered. Sometimes, frankly, I am afraid to hear his voice; for I know that he will say what I may not want to hear. But I know that it is important for me to hear once again the words of the Good Shepherd: I know my sheep, and my sheep know me.

The Good Shepherd also includes other sheep. Jesus said: I have other sheep too, and they are not of this fold. I must bring them in also.

Now here is the question for this morning. What is an oxymoron? An oxymoron is a combination of contradictory terms, seemingly canceling each other out. For example: bittersweet, jumbo-shrimp, authentic-reproduction, University of Memphis Football, House ethics committee.

Let me give you another. Good shepherd. Certainly to the modern ear there is nothing contradictory about that, until we learn that in the ancient world shepherding was really not considered the romantic, humble occupation that we think of it today. Shepherds were looked upon often as gypsies are looked upon in some parts of Europe today. They were dirty, thieves. So despised were shepherds that under Jewish law, a shepherd could not be a witness in a trial. They were notorious liars.

Just when we think we've got shepherds figured out, Jesus throws us for a loop and uses the term good shepherd. You see, in God's flock, there are going to be so many people that you did not expect. There are some people who are not of my fold (and of course he is speaking of the gentiles) and I must bring them in too. This shepherd is an inclusive shepherd.

In John Drinkwater's historical drama Abraham Lincoln, a woman says to Lincoln: Mr. President, have you heard the good news? In the latest battle we suffered 800 casualties and the enemy 2700. How splendid."

"Splendid," replied Lincoln, "that 3500 souls are lost?" Oh, Mr. President, she said, you must not look at it in that way. Only 800 of them counted. Replies Lincoln: "Madam, the world is much bigger than your heart." We have a Good Shepherd who is inclusive.

The good shepherd also sacrifices. Jesus worded it this way: The shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Lay down your life for a worthless animal!? It hardly seems reasonable. That is, until we remember that we are the sheep that he is talking about. We are the worthless ones. It is called atonement--the shedding of one's blood on behalf of another who doesn't deserve it.

Raymund Kolbe, born in Poland, became a Franciscan. He was a missionary to Japan when he became ill and returned to Poland. He ran a printing press to encourage devotion to the Immaculate Mary. He was the last friar at his monastery when the Germans conquered the area. On February 17, 1941, the monastery was shut down; Kolbe was arrested by the German Gestapo and taken to the Pawiak prison. Three months later, he was transferred to Auschwitz.

Never abandoning his priesthood, Kolbe was the victim to severe violence and harassment. Toward the end of his second month in Auschwitz, men were chosen to face death by starvation to warn against escapes. Kolbe was not chosen but volunteered to take the place of a man with a family.

It is said during the last days of his life Kolbe led prayers to Our Lady with the prisoners and remained calm. He was the last of the group to remain alive, after two weeks of dehydration and starvation. The guards gave him a lethal injection of carbolic acid. The stories tell that he raised his left arm and calmly awaited death.

St. Maximilian Kolbe died on August 14 and his remains were cremated on August 15, the same day as the Assumption of Mary feast day.

Recognized as the Servant of God, Kolbe was beatified as a "Confessor of the Faith" on October 17, 1971 by Pope Paul VI and canonized by Pope John Paul II on October 10, 1982. Pope John Paul II declared Kolbe not a confessor, but a martyr.

Kolbe's is often depicted in a prison uniform and with a needle being injected into an arm. He is the patron saint of drug addicts, prisoners, families, and the pro-life movement and his feast day is celebrated on August 14.

The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. You don't have a life worth living for if you don't have a cause worth dying for. If we are to follow the shepherding model as laid down by Christ, then sacrifice must be a part of our faith. It means that the church must now lay down her life for a worthless and undeserving society.

It is not enough that we simply remain sheep. Christ is calling us into the roll of shepherd. Jesus asked Simon Peter one day: Peter, do you love me? Lord, he said, you know that I do love you. Then, came the reply, feed my sheep. If we are to be faithful, there is no alternative. Amen.

## II

Is there anything harder on the ego than being rejected? I suspect that is one reason many married persons are happy they are no longer playing the dating game. It hurts too much when someone rejects you.

“What’s wrong with me?” is the question we inevitably ask.

Charles R. Boatman tells about a strange, new twist on this ancient ritual. He notes that traditionally, the male of our species makes the first approach in the dating game. Men have developed all sorts of pick-up lines to interest the women they are attracted to. An important step in the process is a request for the woman’s phone number.

I remember one girl I was dating used this line, “Jonathan, you know that nice guys finish last and you’re one of the nicest guys I know.”

What if the woman is totally uninterested, however, but doesn’t want to crush the poor fellow’s fragile ego in a public place? The option of giving a false phone number has been around a long time, says Boatman, but now a new twist has been added: she now can give him the phone number of the local “rejection hotline” then smile, and walk away. The would-be suitor thinks he has hit the jackpot, but it is a cruel illusion.

When he calls the following day, he hears this recording: “Hello, this is not the person you were trying to call. You’ve reached the rejection hotline . . . Unfortunately, the person who gave you this rejection hotline number did not want you to have her real number.” Even worse, the rude voice goes on to list numerous negative characteristics that the woman may have noticed. (1)

Wouldn’t that be devastating? You would have to have thick skin even to risk such a response. Rejection. What a cruel thing to happen to anyone, and yet it happens to us all sooner or later.

You apply for a job. You believe it is the perfect fit for you. But your prospective employer has other ideas. Rejection.

You work hard on a proposal at work. You know your boss will be delighted. Instead, she is more impressed by a co-worker’s idea. Rejection.

It happens to everybody. It happens to best-selling writers.

The Christopher Little Literary Agency receives 12 publishing rejections in a row for their new client, until the eight-year-old daughter of a Bloomsbury editor demands to read the rest of the book. The editor agrees to publish but advises the writer to get a day job since she has little chance of making money in children’s books. Yet *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* by J.K. Rowling spawns a series where the last four novels consecutively set records as the fastest-selling books in history, on both sides of the Atlantic, with combined sales of 450 million.

*The Diary of Anne Frank*, a book that has inspired millions, was rejected 15 times and called “very dull” by one publisher.

**“You have no business being a writer and should give up.”** Zane Grey ignores the advice. There are believed to be over 250 million copies of his books in print.

*Chicken Soup for the Soul* by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen was rejected 140 times. And yet they turned it into a series of books that have made them both very, very rich.

Alex Haley writes for eight years and receives 200 consecutive rejections. His novel ***Roots*** becomes a publishing sensation, selling 1.5 million copies in its first seven months of release, and going on to sell 8 million. Such is the success that The Pulitzer Prize award the novel a Special Citation in 1977

Stephen King's disturbing work, *Carrie*, was rejected 30 times. Supposedly, after the final rejection, King threw the manuscript in the trash and his wife fished it out. (2)

It happens to best-selling writers. In fact, it happens to celebrities of every kind.

When Steven Spielberg applied to the film schools of both UCLA and USC he was rejected. But he's done all right for himself as a director of blockbuster films.

When Fred Astaire had his first screen test at MGM, the casting director wrote this memo: "Can't act! Slightly bald! Can dance a little."

Cartoonist Charles Schulz of "Peanuts" fame had every cartoon that he drew rejected by his school's yearbook staff.

Henry Kissinger (remember him?) is best remembered by his classmates as the kid nobody wanted to eat lunch with at school.

So take heart. Rejection happens to everyone sooner or later. If you're unable to deal with this fact of life, you're in trouble. Because sooner or later you're going to be rejected.

**Our Master was rejected.** We read in today's lesson from Acts 4, "The stone that [the] builders rejected has become the head cornerstone." Luke, the writer of Acts, was quoting Psalm 118:22. He was saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy. "The stone . . . that was rejected has become the head cornerstone."

Let's recap what is happening in the book of Acts. In chapter 3 there is a much beloved story about a lame man who was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful. Friends or family brought him to that gate every day to beg. This was the first century equivalent of a welfare program.

When this poor man saw Peter and John about to enter the gate, he asked them for money. But, boy, did he get a surprise. Peter turned to the man and said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Then, taking the lame man by the right hand, Peter helped him up.

Instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong and he began walking and jumping, and praising God. This was one happy man.

People who recognized this man were filled with wonder and amazement when they saw him carrying on like this. A huge crowd gathered and Peter began preaching to the crowd about the resurrected Jesus and his power to heal. This disturbed the priests and the captain of the temple guard, for many who heard the message believed what the two Apostles said. In fact, that day the number of believers grew to about five thousand.

The Sadducees were particularly disturbed by the Apostles' claim that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. The Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection from the dead. Christ's resurrection, if true, presented them with a real dilemma. It struck down one of their core beliefs. And so they seized Peter and John and had them put in jail. The following morning those who were disturbed by the Apostles' teaching interrogated Peter. "By what power or what name did you do this?" they asked. Instead of answering their question, Peter took the opportunity to do a little teaching.

Peter explained that whatever they saw the disciples doing was not being accomplished by their own power or strength, but by the power of the risen Christ.

Peter also reminded them that this act of healing the lame man was an act of kindness. Surely that should take precedence over rules and regulations. This lame man was rejoicing and praising God because God had healed him.

Finally, Peter confirmed that this lame man was healed through the name of Jesus. This was the same Jesus, he said, whom the religious leaders had crucified but, in fulfillment of scriptures, God had raised from the dead.

Peter further elaborates by repeating the beautiful verse already expressed in Psalm 112: "The stone you builders rejected . . . has become the cornerstone." He reminded all who were present that Jesus, although temporarily humiliated, was subsequently glorified. He is now the Redeemer and no one can go before the Father unless they come through him. There are some important things that our lesson for today is saying to us.

**First of all, Jesus, the stone the builders rejected, is the cornerstone of our faith.** That is the important thing we need to see.

Let me comment for a moment on the significance of the cornerstone or capstone as it is sometimes referred to. The cornerstone or capstone is not simply a decorative stone used to finish off the corners of a building with a bit of architectural flair. Rather it is that fundamental stone that structurally holds a building together! Visualize for a moment an old Roman archway, built from two columns of carefully carved stones. Where the two sides arch in toward each other at the top and meet in the center, there's a triangular shaped stone that sits in the middle and balances the two sides of the arch against each other. That is the capstone. If you removed that stone, the whole thing would fall to pieces. (3) Make no mistake about it, Jesus is the capstone or cornerstone for all who follow him.

German theologian, Johann David Michaelis taught that this passage from the Psalms concerning the cornerstone refers to a specific event that reportedly took place during the building of Solomon's temple. It's said that this massive temple was built in relative silence. There was no pounding of hammers. The reason there was no pounding of hammers is because the plans were so exact that each stone was perfectly shaped at the quarry. When the stones arrived at the building site, each one fit perfectly into place.

But there was one huge stone that didn't seem to fit anywhere, and the builders placed it to the side. Eventually it got in the way, and workmen pushed it over the bank and it rolled into down into the Kidron Valley below. After the foundation had been laid, the time came to hoist the cornerstone into place. But the cornerstone could not be found. Word was sent back to the quarry, but the masons there replied it had already been delivered. Finally it was deduced that it was the stone that had been rejected and had rolled into the valley! When it was retrieved, it slid perfectly into place, serving as the stone that held all the others in position. (4) "The stone you builders rejected . . . has become the cornerstone," wrote the

Psalmist. Luke knew this was the perfect description of Jesus. He was rejected by the religious leaders of his day, but he was the only foundation upon which people could reliably build their lives.

Mark it down so you never forget it. **Jesus is the only reliable foundation on which we can build our lives.** Is your life built on that foundation? If so, you are a very fortunate person.

There is a young woman I read about who feels a deep connection to these verses. Here is her testimony:

“I am the second child of my mother . . . a single mom . . . and when she gave birth to me, she decided that she never wanted me, so just like Moses was placed in a basket and sent down a river, I was placed under a plum tree in front of my father’s house. A lady was passing by and told my paternal grandmother that I was outside under the tree. My father came and got me and his house was my home for 22 years. I grew up with him and my grandmother.

“Fast-forward to 24 years later, a university graduate with a second degree, the Chief Financial Officer of a major company and a well-known Christian woman who is recognized for philanthropy, I was doing pretty well despite growing up always believing that I was my mother’s reject. I reconnected with my mother at a seminar; she had sought me out because by now she had seven children, nowhere to live, no job and no food to give them. The short version is I bought her a piece of land, built a house on it, found her a job and moved my youngest brother in with me so that I could mentor him. Today he is a 3<sup>rd</sup> year law student. The statement made about Jesus being the head cornerstone, the redemptive blood of my Savior and my relationship with him was what helped me to forgive my mother and made it easy for me to become the head cornerstone in her life. She rejected me and gave me away . . . and few years later I was the one she needed.” (6)

Can you imagine being able to love and forgive like that? Only Christ can work such a change in a person’s heart. Jesus, the stone the builders rejected is the cornerstone of our faith. Jesus is the only reliable foundation on which we can build our lives.

Back in the days when the Old West was being settled, there were many pioneers who made their way over the Oregon Trail. When they got to the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains, they found a stream a little too wide

to cross in one step. So they “two-stepped” across by using an ugly lump sticking up out of the water in the middle of the stream.

As the years passed, other pioneers settled in that area, built their cabins, strung fences and plowed the fields. One man built his cabin near that same stream. But he had a problem his door flapped in the wind. To solve his problem, he found a heavy lump in the middle of the stream. So he carried it to his front step and it became a door stop.

More years passed. Railroads were built across the nation, more people pushed west and modern cities sprang up. A nephew of that same pioneer went east to study geology at a large university. He returned home during vacation. Lo and behold, on the front porch of his uncle’s cabin by the stream, he found not just an ugly lump, and not just a heavy lump, but a lump of pure gold, the largest gold nugget ever discovered on the eastern slopes of the Rockies! It had been there for three generations, but everybody saw it in a different light, some as an ugly lump, some as a heavy lump, but only the nephew saw it for what it really was a lump of gold. (7)

The same thing is true of Jesus. The same Jesus whom some have seen as a stumbling rock is to those who know him as he really is, a precious stone the chief cornerstone. He is the chief cornerstone of our



faith. He is the only reliable foundation on which we can build our lives. Won't you welcome him into your life today?

1. Charles R. Boatman in *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2009-2010*. Ronald L. Nickelson, ed. (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2009), p. 28.

2. *My Father's Business: 30 Inspirational Stories for Finding God's Will For Your Life (Purpose Driven Dreams - Seeking God's Vision For Your Life)* (Eddie Jones)

3. *Words & Music* by Lari Goss. © 1976 Bridge Building Music, Inc. (BMI). 4. Rev. David B. Smith, [www.fatherdave.org/article/article\\_213.html](http://www.fatherdave.org/article/article_213.html).

5. Robert J. Morgan, *He Shall Be Called: 150 Names of Jesus and What They Mean to You* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2009).

5. Dr. Gilbert W. Bowen, [http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/Bowen/OT/Isaiah\\_43.1-7\\_WhoseAreYou.htm](http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/Bowen/OT/Isaiah_43.1-7_WhoseAreYou.htm). 6. Avril Ellis.

7. As told by Alan Smith, <http://www.tftd-online.com/content.asp?CID=19468>.

King Duncan

### III Desiano

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, now almost twenty years ago, our nation has come to use the idea of "hero" on a regular basis. Heroes are not just the Spiderman and Superwoman images of our comics and movies; heroes are everyday neighbors who are willing to sacrifice a lot. During the pandemic, we have even acknowledged, and rightly so, healthcare workers at every level, from orderlies to the nurses and doctors in our ICUs.

Among our heroes, there is a special class. These are the few who, more than being willing to sacrifice, know that they will definitely have to sacrifice. The newspaper had a story of a survivor from the invasion of Normandy who lived to be 100 years old. It told of the numerous wounds that he suffered as he went onto the beach at Normandy but how he fought through his pain, and seemingly certain death, to support his fellow invaders.

We see this in our admiration for Martyrs. Some of them die, like St. Oscar Romero, as a result of their ministry. They don't expect to die. Others, like the martyrs in Ancient Rome, knew they would be killed but still professed their faith in Jesus.

This is what characterizes the Good Shepherd as Jesus describes himself. He contrasts the Good Shepherd from others who are hired and just doing their job. When trouble comes, the hired people run away. But the Good Shepherd does whatever needs to be done, gives whatever needs to be given, suffers whatever he needs to suffer, for the sake of his flock.

What makes sacrifices like this possible? For most heroes, the value of human life and society's good makes the possibility of sacrifice possible. For Jesus, what makes his sacrifice possible is knowing that, because of the love of his Father, his death will lead to greater life, to the fullness of life, not only for himself but for all who come to live his life. "No one takes my life from me. I lay it down, and I take it up again." Jesus does what he does because it is how he shows the gift of divine love and life.

We see this gift at work in the first reading when Peter explains how a crippled man has been healed. This happens because of the name of Jesus, the name of the Good Shepherd. But we should not think of Jesus' name like a tag or a label, or like the title of a team. Ancient Jews thought that the idea of "name" is the total reality of a person. The crippled man is healed because of the total reality that Jesus is: giving his life as a servant, now raised from the dead, and bestowing his Spirit upon us. This is the pattern Jesus shows as the path to fullness. This is the reality in which this crippled man is healed. This is the pattern in which we can find salvation because it touches what Jesus touched, the depths of God and the depths of human life.

When we gather at Mass, we invoke the name of Jesus. We stand with the Good Shepherd. We see how his giving his life has opened up a future of full life for all of humankind. His sacrificial love invites us to commit ourselves to lives of self-giving love. This is the name, the reality, in which we all live as believers because Jesus has made us people of resurrection and hope.