

May 3, 2020 | Third Sunday of Easter (A)

[ACTS 2:14A, 36-41](#)

[PS 23: 1-3A, 3B4, 5, 6](#)

[1 PT 2:20B](#)

[2 JN 10:1-10](#)

By John R. Donahue, SJ

“I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” As we recoil from the specter of death that haunts our lives from the Coronavirus pandemic, these words of Jesus may fall on deaf ears. But these are the final words of Jesus in the Gospel for “Good Shepherd Sunday” and herald a profound message of hope.

The shepherd imagery so strong in today’s readings is pervasive in biblical thought. God is the ultimate shepherd of the people providing guidance, sustenance, and protection. God, who gives hope to the exiles returning from Babylon cares for them “Like a shepherd, he feeds his flock; in his arms, he gathers the lambs (Isa 40:11).” Phrases in the responsorial psalm so often used at funerals acquire special meaning today, “the Lord is my shepherd,” and “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for years to come.”

A frequent subject of early Christian art is Jesus, the Good Shepherd. It’s an image combining elements from the parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7) with Jesus' self-description in John 10. The beautiful fresco in Rome's catacomb of St. Domitilla shows verdant setting and Jesus with a sheep draped around his shoulders while other sheep look longingly at him--symbolizing that as Good Shepherd Christ will lead his followers to paradise.

Looking at the entire chapter of this Gospel, Jesus first alludes to himself as the “shepherd of the sheep” who recognize him and hear his voice (10:2-3) and later simply says “I am the good shepherd” who knows the sheep and gives his life for them — in contrast with hirelings, who neglect the sheep (10:11). The translation "good" suggests also an authentic or model shepherd. Negatively, Jesus' contrast with the hirelings evokes God's polemic against false shepherds (leaders), who neglect the sheep and exploit them for their own gain (Ezek 34:11-31).

This Sunday is also designated World Day of Prayer for Vocations, so one immediately thinks of the wide range of vocations to "pastoral service"--lay, religious and priestly. John 10 warns against identifying too readily "office" with pastoral ministry. Jesus is the shepherd, who knows the sheep, and they will hear his voice. John’s Gospel shows little interest in structured roles and offices and lacks any appointment of twelve apostles; the beloved disciple, not Peter is given pride of place. A Johannine disciple is not chosen to govern or even proclaim the gospel but to be a faithful witness who brings people to Jesus. The “pastoring” is done by Jesus, who knows and listens to the sheep. Unlike Jesus’ words to Peter in Matt 16:16-18, there is no commission to

exercise authoritative power, but the “Petrine ministry” in John consists of feeding and caring for “the flock of Jesus” and is given to a forgiven sinner chosen on the quality of his love (John 21:15-19).

Pope Francis has embraced Jesus’ image as the “Good Shepherd” and cautioned bishops and priests not to hide behind their ceremonial rituals and funeral like faces, but to be shepherds who smell like their sheep. Francis is calling on us to hear the voice of Jesus in the cries of the immigrant and the homeless and in the pleas of the poor and marginalized. Pastors (shepherds) and the Church as a whole are to follow Jesus, the good shepherd who was willing to live among his sheep and to offer his life in service for them. Pope Francis is moving the Church from being a “doctrinal” institution overly concerned about teaching to a “pastoral” one, defined in terms of life-giving self-service to the sheep not of “this fold” (John 10:16). Such is the vocation of the whole Church.

Enrich your prayer and reflection with these readings. Jesus is the incarnation of the shepherding God who protects and cares for a people. He knows his sheep and lays down his life for them, but he will take it up again (10:17). As the Shepherd discourse winds down Jesus says “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish” (10:27-28). Such is life in abundance even as a vicious pestilence has taken so many lives.

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