

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is probably one of the most famous and endearing images of our Lord that we know. Pictures and paintings often show Jesus carrying a lamb over his shoulder with other sheep surrounding him – or Jesus tending sheep on a hillside in a very serene and picturesque setting. Today's gospel coupled with Psalm 23 can certainly embellish these images of the Good Shepherd.

If we delve more deeply into these texts, there is much more to appreciate the life of a shepherd: raising sheep in first-century Palestine. We can then apply the scenario to the life Jesus and his ministry.

Psalm 23 on the surface describes a very pastoral scene – verdant, lush pastures, restful flowing waters, refreshment, always at my side guiding me. Then the psalm mentions two tools of the shepherd that make that serene image possible: a rod and a staff.



The staff was, and still is, a long staff with a hook at the end of it. Shepherds would use it as a walking staff, but more importantly would use the hook to help bring back a sheep that had strayed. He could use it to pull a sheep out of a crevice. He would also use it to rub the back of a sheep or to pull a shy lamb closer. Shepherds still use a staff today.

The rod, on the other hand, was more of a weapon. It was a heavy club that warded off predators. The shepherd used it to defend the sheep from danger – even in a dark valley.

The rod and the staff were two very practical tools of the shepherd.

John describes the relationship a shepherd has with his flock. Jesus is both the shepherd and the gate to the sheepfold. The sheepfold is sort of a corral, a circular wall of stones, topped by barriers of briar. There is a small opening for the sheep to pass through.

He leads the sheep in and out. People who raise sheep today insist that shepherds do not lead sheep. They rather walk behind and urge them forward, thus being able to keep an eye out for wayward stragglers.

In the Middle East however, some shepherds walk before the sheep and call them with a peculiar cry. It is this cry, rather than simply voice recognition, that guides the sheep.

Once they are all in the sheepfold, instead of closing a hinged gate, the shepherd simply lies across the opening, so that nothing or no one can get through without going over his body first, without confronting or even killing him.

This particular kind of shepherd literally makes himself into a barrier gate, a role that requires not only care but courage. If any marauders or predators are to get to the sheep, they will only do so over the dead body of the shepherd.

When Jesus reveals that he is the gate of the sheepfold, he is not just suggesting that he is the unique way into safety or the only way out to pasture. He is saying that he will prevent our destruction by laying down his life. He has come to us that we may have life and have it abundantly.

The continuation of the passage is important. "I am the good shepherd, the one that lays down his life for the sheep." It is for this reason, we are assured, that God's love is so totally poured out into Jesus – and so empowering – that his life, even though laid down, is given back again.

We continue to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus in a special way during these 50 days of Easter. The scripture readings help us to continue to "unpack" his saving Passover for us – his sacrifice, his death, and his resurrection. It gives new meaning to the promise of the twenty-third psalm. With this shepherd, we shall never want. We will have repose. We will be led, refreshed and guided along right paths.

"Even in the dark valley (like this pandemic) I will fear no evil. You are at my side (even in social distancing). You give me courage (to follow safe guidelines). You are my food and drink (as people replenish food pantries). You anoint me (giving me strength to endure). There is nothing I shall want (even when unemployed I will hope). Goodness and kindness will follow me all my days (the pandemic will eventually end). I will dwell in your sheepfold forever (as we remember and pray for those who have died)."

Can we be lost or destroyed? Only over the Lord's dead body. But he is risen now, to die no more. Through the laying down of his life on the cross and his rising before us, we are led into the sheepfold of eternal life.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, take some time today, as a family, and pray with Psalm 23. Read it slowly. See if a word or phrase captures your attention. Listen to what our Lord might be revealing to you. Then share your thoughts with each other.

In doing so I promise you will discover a deeper meaning of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.