

Only very recently did I start to like the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. That image always seemed to me to be saccharine, too anodyne, perhaps too indulgent. Maybe that's why it's so popular— and if someone likes it, more power to them. Jesus gives us many ways to connect to him, and all that matters is that we do. Fortunately, at least for me, context shows that gauzy images of Jesus gently holding a calm, cozy sheep — all perfectly clean, in a tranquil, garden-like setting — are pretty much the opposite of what today's Gospel is supposed to make us think of.

First of all, the context within John's Gospel shows that this is a confrontational discourse. The very last time we are told to whom Jesus is speaking, a few verses back, Jesus is speaking to the religious leaders who were trying to get him in trouble for healing a man born blind. And the next time we are told, Jesus is still locked in conflict with them. There is nothing in the text to indicate that Jesus is speaking to a different audience with this discourse, so it takes on a very confrontational tone. The religious leaders had been debating whether Jesus was a sinner and/or possessed, so we can imagine Jesus giving this discourse forcefully, perhaps in chagrin or exasperation. I imagine him ranting, "Of course I'm the good guy! I'm healing people and defending them from your allegations of sinfulness! If you can't see that I'm the good guy here, you're as blind as he was!"

Secondly, the cultural context makes this discourse even more charged. In Jesus's place and time, it was common to refer to kings as shepherds. Knowing that, we can understand that Jesus is making a political statement that could easily be construed as treason. Not only is he referring to himself as a king, by saying specifically that he is the *good* shepherd, anyone listening could only conclude that Jesus was condemning Herod and/or Caesar, comparing them to self-centered farmhands. A bold move, to put it lightly, but understanding this helps us understand why Pilate accuses Jesus of calling himself a king during the Passion narrative.

As if that wasn't enough, Jesus goes on to claim that he has many followers who are not known or present, which could sound a bit like a guy claiming to have a girlfriend, but she lives in Canada, so you've never met her. But even then, Jesus wasn't done. He was saving the most brazen assertion for last. Jesus then claims to have power over life and death, asserting that no one could kill him against his will, and if he did lay down his life, he could take it up again. They must have thought Jesus was daring them to attack him or try to have him executed, and maybe he was.

Jesus's Good Shepherd discourse — perhaps, his Good Shepherd rant — only leaves us with two possibilities. Either Jesus was utterly out of his mind, or, Jesus is exactly who he says he is.

But of course, everything Jesus said was true. Herod and Caesar were self-centered. Jesus was, and is, good, even to people who don't understand who he is. Although he wasn't interested in earthly power, as a descendent of David, he had a legitimate claim to the throne. Even the reference to unknown followers checks out.

That's widely assumed to be a reference to the expansion of Jesus's mission to include Gentiles, but John's Gospel explicitly tells us that Joseph of Arimathea was a secret follower of Jesus, and strongly implies that Nicodemus became one, too.

The most important assertion, though, is seemingly harder to prove or disprove. How could anyone ever prove, or disprove, that Jesus rose from the dead? On the one hand, to the best of my knowledge, no one has ever seriously proposed any particular location as Jesus's final resting place. At least one modern atheist has insisted that Jesus's body "must have" been casually discarded after the Crucifixion, but if ancient skeptics had thought that was plausible, they certainly would have said so, but again, to the best of my knowledge, that was never a serious argument against the early Church. Indeed, it's kind of remarkable that apparently, ancient critics of the Jesus Movement did not make the attacks that would seem to us most effective.

On the other hand, the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection are disjointed and conflicting. The Evangelists seemingly disagree on what happened, when, where, and to whom. Some of that can be explained by the principle I mentioned in my Easter sermon, that ancient writers commonly left out endings that they were confident that their readers already knew well. So it's quite possible that Matthew, Luke, and John highlighted the Resurrection stories that they thought were most important for their purposes and deliberately left out the rest. And indeed, after the risen Jesus appears to Thomas, St. John explicitly writes, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book." And the truth is that history is always written from incomplete and often inconsistent accounts.

Not that I think any of that would convince a skeptic that the Resurrection is an historical fact. What convinced me was the examples of the apostles. They had every reason in the world to go home to their families and their livelihoods after the Crucifixion, or perhaps to find someone else to follow, but instead, they gave up everything — in many cases, even gave up their lives — in order to deliver an urgent message of grace, hope, and conversion of life to as many communities as they could. That they did this is not disputed, for there is no other explanation for the development of the first Christian communities. The testimony of St. Peter in today's reading from Acts is a perfect example of the apostolic mission, an eyewitness proclaiming that Jesus died on the Cross and rose again in order that all people might be saved from their sins.

Like Jesus, Peter spoke boldly to a powerful, hostile audience, in the wake of a controversial incident of miraculous healing. If anything, the stakes were even higher for Peter and John, because they had been arrested and were still in custody. I can think of no other explanation for why they and the other apostles would have acted and spoken so boldly, at such great cost to themselves, besides the explanation they themselves gave. Jesus was crucified by men and raised by God, and "there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." So it almost goes without saying that a faithful Christian has nothing to be afraid of, and a compelling

mission to take up.

Having a Good Shepherd only matters if that Shepherd is strong enough to stand up to the wolves of this world and loving enough to rescue the sheep who would otherwise be lost. Fortunately, we don't just have images and metaphors, we have examples of faithfulness and devotion that stood up to the world and made peoples' lives better. Just as the apostles followed Jesus's example of bold faith with their own, we can follow his example, and theirs.

We can refuse to let Jesus be coopted by political forces that would reduce him to their legitimizer and endorser. We can refuse to settle for a compromised Jesus who merely provides superficial comfort and advice. We can insist that all people be treated as the beloved children of God, made in God's image, that we know them to be. We can demand nothing less than love of God and love of neighbor as our personal guiding principles and our vision of a just and healthy society.

The gauzy, tranquil image of the Good Shepherd some of us started with may well exist in heaven, and that is a comforting thought. But I am deeply, profoundly glad that God has sent us the Good Shepherd we need to face and overcome the difficult realities of this world. I pray that we all follow him as closely as we can, and connect others to the glorious truth that has been revealed to us.