

I know people love it, but this whole “Good Shepherd” thing has never sat well with me. Does that mean the problem’s on my end? Probably. This is one of the most familiar images of Christ for most Christians. Christ the Good Shepherd can be a comforting thought in difficult times, but I struggle with the implications. First of all, you don’t need a degree in animal husbandry to know that sheep are dumb. Above all, sheep are known for mindless herd behavior, following blindly, oblivious to any threats, needing the constant attention of a shepherd because they can’t take care of themselves. I would be insulted to be compared with a sheep and I’m uncomfortable with the common comparison between clergy and shepherds.

Is this what Jesus had in mind when he told his enemies, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” Did he mean, don’t worry, my followers are no threat to you because they’re too dumb to offer any meaningful opposition. Or conversely, was Jesus making a veiled political threat? Did he mean, don’t mess with me, because my followers will do whatever I say without thinking twice? Fortunately, Jesus went on, and he meant what he said: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.” Jesus made it clear that his previous deeds of power, the miracles that brought him fame and infamy, were not meant solely to show how powerful Jesus was, but also to show what God’s will is for all people: that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

This is good news for us, so why did Jesus’s opponents react so strongly against his words? They would claim that it was because they were outraged by Jesus claiming to be equal with God, daring to say, “The Father and I are one.” But one should always be skeptical when anyone cites religious fervor as the reason for violence. It’s almost always something else, like maintaining power. The enemies of Jesus had power and they were determined to hang on to it. Their power was founded on a credible threat of violence, up to and including death. It was bad enough that Jesus challenged their authority. Worse that many ordinary people liked Jesus more than his enemies. But now Jesus posed the ultimate threat to their power: Jesus claimed that he could nullify their most potent weapon. Jesus claimed that he could give life – eternal life – unbeatable, indestructible life.

What would the world be like if no one feared death anymore? The definitive work of speculative theology on the subject is that episode of *Family Guy*, the one where the grim reaper sprains his ankle and has to rest up for a while, making it impossible for anyone to die. When people find out, the first thing they do is assault each other with all manner of weapons, and laugh at the fact that no one is getting hurt. After that, the show got silly.

But seriously, what if we really believed that death were destroyed, not just for part of a 22-minute cartoon, but forever? We could truly live without fear, we could take on all the powers of the world that seek to limit and control us by limiting and controlling our lives. We would feel enduring hope and joy, and act with overwhelming generosity and altruism. Life would be pretty great.

So it's a good thing that Jesus has given us words and signs that this is true, that death has been destroyed. From today's bold statement that Jesus gives us eternal life, to his raising Lazarus, to his own supremely glorious resurrection, Jesus makes this truth abundantly clear. And we have even more to celebrate in the vision of eternal life from the Revelation to John: "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

"These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ... The one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The lamb is the shepherd. This is not a mixed metaphor, not a confused riddle, not a zen koan. This is the simple truth. God is one of us. God became one of us to bring us to God, and God's will is being done. "No one will snatch them out of my hand," Jesus said. And then he went on to say, "What my Father has given me is greater than all else." Again, Jesus was speaking plainly. Literal sheep are a fungible commodity, a product, interchangeable, routinely bought and sold. Human beings are greater than anything else in creation, greater than nations or rulers, greater than stars or planets, greater than angels or archangels, because we are made in the image of God. When we accept the truth that God has given us the gift of eternal life, we can be bold and free. Thanks to our relationship to the shepherd, we can move from strength to strength, and become partners in our own ongoing creation.

Because of Jesus, we are not the sheep the world wants us to be but the saints we were created to be. We are not just passive recipients but unstoppable agents of life and hope and transformation. We can be forgiven for thinking we have to wait for power or permission. Our mission began not with a starting gun, but in the deep mysterious silence of the resurrection. Our understanding of this silence began not with our logical conclusions, but with Jesus returning, revealing himself, and opening the minds of his followers. And he continues to reveal the fullness of his grace by the Holy Spirit acting

among us and through us, shaping us into the body of Christ, uniting the sheep with the shepherd.