

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TRUE SHEPHERD

*“Beneath the noise, below the din,
I heard your voice, it’s whisperin’,
In science and in medicine,
I was a stranger, you took me in.”*

-U2, “Miracle Drug”

The next time you’re in the supermarket, pay close attention to the contents of the checkout aisle. No matter the city or store, the setup is roughly the same. Shoppers are corralled into a final bombardment of consumer goods, strategically placed to catch the eye and stimulate the senses. In an article appropriately titled “The Gospel According to Safeway,” one writer points out the common features of the checkout lane:

“Scantly clad supermodels flash seductive stares and tabloids prophesy the next apocalypse as we are funneled through a modified version of Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory. The magazine resting next to the super-sized peanut butter cups promises we can shed ten pounds in the next fifteen minutes. Have we entered the seventh heaven of hedonism?”

But, he notes, there’s more going on here that meets the eye. The checkout aisle isn’t just a last-ditch effort to boost consumer spending. “The checkout line conveys a message,” he says. A “message of what it means to live ‘the good life.’”

Every major world religion warns of the dangers of unrestrained desire. But in the late stages of capitalism, we’ve turned consumption into a national pastime. More than ever before, we’re hyper-aware of the brands that we buy, wear, and drive, all of which have become a core way of constructing and expressing our identity. As media expert Jean Kilbourne notes,

“Advertising often sells a great deal more than products. It sells values, images, and concepts of love and sexuality, romance, success, and, perhaps most important, normalcy. To a great extent, it tells us who we are and who we should be. We are increasingly using brand names to create our identities. James Twitchell argues that the label of our shirt, the make of our car, and our favorite laundry detergent are filling the vacuum once occupied by religion, education, and our family name.”

When Jesus compares himself to a shepherd, it’s not meant to be a glowing endorsement of our reasoning skills. After all, who wants to be a “sheep?” These days, we might think of “sheep” as an insult to those who blindly follow the herd. In reality, we all follow some crowd, some value system — some promise of “the good life.” The only real question is: Who will we trust to be the true shepherd of our hearts? And what is the good life to which we’re headed?

THE TRUE DOOR

When Jesus delivers his “good Shepherd” discourse, he’s still standing amidst the crowd at the Feast of Tabernacles. There, as you may recall, Jesus had declared that he is the true “Light of the world,” and demonstrated this fact by opening the eyes of a man born blind. In fact, John doesn’t even record a breath between chapters 9 and 10, with Jesus rebuking the religious teachers for their spiritual blindness, and now declaring himself to be the true Shepherd:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." (John 10:1-5)

If you have a background in church, you may already be familiar with the way the Bible uses the imagery of shepherds and sheep. Psalm 23, for example, speaks of God as a faithful shepherd whose “rod” and “staff” bring comfort and blessing. And if you grew up in Sunday School, you may have spent considerable hours gluing cotton balls to construction paper, a grade school facsimile of a shepherd and his flock.

My point is that these images are so common that it’s easy to miss the world of danger that shepherding represents. The desert in Israel stretches for thousands of miles along the Jordan River, and would have formed something of a barrier to the eastern fringe of every major city. Even in Jerusalem, festival-goers would have been keenly aware that just on the other side of the Mount of Olives lay a vast, inhospitable wasteland where food was scarce, water was rare, and danger lay behind every corner. In such a world, shepherds had to possess both the physical and mental agility to tend their flocks in a harsh climate.

Predictably, Jesus’ listeners don’t immediately grasp Jesus’ figure of speech. So he unpacks his image further:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. (John 10:6-10)

For the second time, Jesus makes reference to “thieves and robbers,” and it’s becoming increasingly obvious that he was speaking about the Pharisees. He wouldn’t be the first. The Hebrew prophets spoke of the religious teachers as “shepherds who lack understanding” (Isaiah 56:9-12) who are “destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture” (Jeremiah 23:1-2). But through the Hebrew prophets, God likewise promised:

“I will look after my sheep. I will rescue them....I will bring them out from the nations and gather them. I will pasture them....I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land.” (Ezekiel 34:12-14)

Jesus is effectively declaring himself to be the fulfillment of this passage. In contrast to the corrupt shepherds of his day, Jesus will lead his people to proper grazing land. More specifically, Jesus declares himself to be the true Door. In the desert, shepherds would commonly herd their sheep into a walled enclosure, often backed by a cliff. They wouldn't have a gate for the pen, so they would use thornbushes to close off the entrance. More commonly, the shepherd himself would sit on the ground, his back against one of the walls of the pen, and serve as a physical barrier. The shepherd would move aside to lead the sheep to food or water. When Jesus says that he is the true Door, he's saying that he is the one who grants his people access to "life and life abundantly."

What is the "good life?" Our culture would answer this question with all the symbols of the checkout aisle. Sex. Money. Power. The good life is anything you can't get enough of. It's the reason why our favorite brands are so seductive, and why "retail therapy" carries such allure. It's why every year, graduation speakers tell a room full of young minds that the greatest goal in life is to "follow your passion," to "reach your true potential," and to never give up on their dreams. There's just one problem: this advice rarely, if ever, leads to "the good life." The reason is simple, says journalist Arthur C. Brooks. It's because "your dreams are liars." In an interview with Harvard Business School, he explains:

"One of the big problems that we have is that when people don't understand happiness at all, they make a lot of mistakes. The biggest mistake that they make, for example, is believing that they'll actually find satisfaction through money, power, and fame. Sooner or later, they become a success addict. ...People get on what we call the 'hedonic treadmill,' where you're running and running and running, and you become deeply addicted to success, which leads you to burnout. And it's based on the mistaken idea that you can actually find ultimate satisfaction through success."

Seeking the good life through success is like a hamster on a wheel. Spin all you want; you'll never reach "the good life." Abundant life doesn't come from having more money, more stuff, or a wall full of trophies, diplomas, and achievements. Abundant life comes from following the true Shepherd, who provides us with a door to the good life.

Where the world offers fleeting promises of happiness, the gospel offers a promise of everlasting joy. John had already made "eternal life" a central focus on his biography of Jesus. Here, his reference to "abundant life" makes clear that he's not just talking about "going to heaven when we die." God is fiercely committed to our joy. On the night of his betrayal, Jesus tells his closest followers that his desire is that their "joy may be full" (John 15:11). Happiness, after all, is circumstantial. It can be granted in an instant, but snatched away just as quickly. Joy, by contrast, is independent of our circumstances. When Jesus speaks of abundant life, he's speaking of the joy that comes from knowing him, the joy that can never be taken away.

THE TRUE SHEPHERD

As the true Door, Jesus is the key to living the good life. But Jesus isn't done, adding another layer to his analogy, saying:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (John 10:11-16)

To understand this, we have to know a thing or two about first-century sheep-herding. To save money, families and shepherds would keep their sheep all together in the same pen. The sheep inside would have to learn to discern the unique call of *their* shepherd, and learn to tune out the rival voices from shepherds who weren't their own.

Christian discipleship is fundamentally about learning to discern the voice of Jesus amidst the cacophony of other, rival "shepherds." That's especially true in an age where we don't have to wait for "a word from our sponsor." Advertising has become baked into our culture. James Twitchell calls it a form of "brand poetry," where consumer symbols take on a kind of coded language of what it means to achieve true happiness. The result? A world full of noise, from the commercials on our TV to billboards and beyond. Social media has even given rise to a new class of advertiser: the "influencer." These digital "shepherds" preen about to help us fall in love with the latest product or fashion craze.

With so many shepherds calling to us, we naturally gravitate toward our favorites. In a now-famous experiment, researchers asked participants to listen to pre-recorded speeches, but each speech was overlaid with static. The participants had the option to press a button to reduce the static to listen more clearly. Some speeches were about the dangers of smoking; others were speeches that attacked Christianity. What they soon learned is that smokers were quick to tune into broadcasts that hinted that smoking might not be that bad for you after all. Meanwhile, devout Christians were quick to let the anti-religious speeches dissolve into static. It's like the old song from Simon & Garfunkel: "a man hears what he wants to hear, and disregards the rest." We're masters of selecting our own shepherds. It's why so many of us get lost in the world of political podcasts, aligning ourselves with the views of our favorite commentator or cable news pundit.

The real danger, of course, is not simply that these shepherds fit our agenda. It's that we fit *theirs*. There's a formational quality to the shepherds we follow, and the more we listen to their promises the more we align ourselves with what *they* expect us to be — whether that's an impulsive consumer or a raging political devotee. James K.A. Smith brings this out when he speaks of the way advertisers don't just speak to consumers; it creates them:

"[T]he majority of mass media is undertaken as a means for creating an audience for advertising that will eventually become a market of consumers. Marketing, then, is driven by investing products with social, sexual, and even religious value, which makes them something much more than they are. In other words, marketing capitalizes on fundamental structural human desires for meaning and transcendence and presents products and services as ways to satisfy these human longings....By using repetition, images, and other strategies....marketing forms us into the kind of persons who want to buy beer to have

meaningful relationships, or buy a car to be respected, or buy the latest thing to come along simply to satisfy the desire that has been formed and implanted in us.”

Advertisers, podcasters, and social media influencers all operate under the same agenda: to bring us into *their* flock and *their* sheepfold. Christian discipleship therefore begins with learning to sift through the “brand poetry” until we hear the voice of the true Shepherd calling his faithful home.

This, of course, goes deeper than media literacy. It’s about learning to distinguish truth from falsehood, and about guarding the wellspring of our hearts against those who would seek to use us for their own ends. Our teenage sons and daughters need to be taught to hear and love the voice of Truth even when their significant other seeks to chase them down an impulsive path. Our friends and neighbors need to hear the tender voice of the Shepherd rising above the clamor of angry politicians and pundits. And we ourselves need the daily disciplines of Scripture and prayer to recognize the Savior’s voice, calling us out of the death-spiral of self-cultivation.

YOUR SMARTPHONE WILL NEVER DIE FOR YOU

One of the most fascinating developments of the modern age is the lengths that companies go to prove their commitment to the latest fashionable cause. You don’t have to look far to find corporate promises of “sustainability” or a more “equitable future.” I’ve known many people who take comfort in knowing that their favorite brands share their commitment to social justice or the environment. But here’s the real question: Do you think these companies care about you? Are they doing this out of love? Or could it be these vague moral gestures are just the latest attempt to transform you into a better consumer? Purse strings, after all, are connected to heart strings. This isn’t cynicism; in years past companies like Philip Morris have been attacked for spending more on advertising their charity work than actually performing their charity work.

Every single human being longs to be known and loved. That’s part of the reason these consumer campaigns work so well. We’ve bitten the lie that not only can these products lead us to the good life, but that by consuming these brands, by aligning ourselves with this celebrity, we, too, can find a lasting source of significance. We chase the dopamine high of social media engagement, or the dream of influence that comes through education or career advancement.

Listen to me very carefully: Your smartphone may bring you a quick jolt of happiness from each new notification. But your smartphone will never die for you. Your career will never die for you. Your favorite podcaster will never die for you. Only the “good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” Jesus has already made this point earlier. Here, he underscores the point, saying:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." (John 10:17-18)

This is among the most explicit declarations of Jesus’ coming death. But far from being a martyr or victim, Jesus declares that he lays down his life under his own authority, in fulfillment with his Father’s will.

This changes everything. The other shepherds insist that if we follow them, then we can become everything we always wanted to be. Smart. Successful. Rich. Desired. But achieving these goals demands a lifetime of self-cultivation and loyalty. When Jesus goes to the cross, Jesus becomes everything I *never* want to be. Despised. Rejected. Who wants to experience that? Only when Jesus becomes those things, it paves the way for the kind of abundant life I never knew I wanted. Our earthly shepherds say: you are loved only when you are beautiful. The gospel says: you are beautiful because you are loved. Because Jesus has become the things I never want to be, I can become the things that my heart truly desires. Known. Loved. Forgiven. Free.

For Jesus' listeners, this message was pure insanity:

There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, "He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?" Others said, "These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" (John 10:19-20)

The story comes full circle. The discourse had begun over the dispute about the man born blind. It concludes with the acknowledgment of Jesus' power to heal. Jesus, the true Shepherd, is the only one who brings lasting change. For Nicodemus, he is the one who makes it possible to be "born again." Jesus is the only one who satisfies our hunger for the bread of life (John 6), and the only source of "living water" (John 4). And he is the only shepherd who opens the eyes of the blind. The Shepherd who dies for us also raises us to new life. And because of that reality, we, too can find life abundantly, joyous and full.

A GOD WHO SMELLS LIKE SHEEP

Jesus, the true Shepherd, knows his flock intimately. "I know my own," he says, "and my own know me." The truest mark of Christian discipleship isn't just to know Jesus as a concept, but to know Jesus on an intimate, personal level.

Some years ago someone wrote a book on pastoring called *They Smell Like Sheep*. The point was that pastors should know their congregations so well that they've been in the mud and the weeds, experiencing life alongside them as they guide them into greater intimacy with God. For Jesus to be the true Shepherd means that he, too, smells like sheep. John's gospel makes it plain that Jesus is the eternal God made flesh. But in Jesus we have a God who smells like sheep; a God who empathizes with us, knows us, and loves us with a ferocious intensity that can only come from a master Shepherd.

It's for the same reason that Jesus speaks of having "sheep in other pastures," referring to the Gentiles who had been far from God but can now be brought near now that the good Shepherd has lay down his life.

A God who smells like sheep knows your filth — and still died for you. When you were faithless, Jesus was counting you among his flock. The true Shepherd will never leave or forsake you. And the true Shepherd guides you home.