

### The Lord is My Shepherd

Sisters and brothers, if a little child – four or five years old – came up to you (maybe your grandchild or niece or nephew or neighbor) and asked you draw for him or her a picture of God and they came supplied with crayon and paper... and wouldn't take "Let's do that later," for an answer... what would be the picture you would draw? Let's take a couple of moments to imagine what picture of God we might draw...

Now, let's take a moment to remember what our own image of God might have been when we were four or five ... or eight years old.... What picture might you have drawn then?

Is your picture of God today different than when you were a five-year-old?

Our Scriptures and spiritual writings give us many images of God and those images which have been imprinted in our DNA have a huge impact on how we relate to God and to ourselves and to others.

The image of God that was given to me as a child was that of a very old, white man with a long beard and blue eyes, holding a stone plaque the 10 Commandments sketched on it... An image of a God that I was scared to death of! A God who would send me right to hell if I committed a mortal sin... and in those days there were a lot of mortal sins that even a young child could commit!!

For example: While preparing for my 1<sup>st</sup> Communion, "Sister" told us that when the priest places the host on our tongue, we should never touch it ... because it was a mortal sin, and our finger might get stuck in our mouth forever! And, sisters and brothers, guess what ... at my 1<sup>st</sup> Communion the host got stuck on the roof of my mouth and, spontaneously, I use my finger to dislodge it ... and the rest is history: hell was my destiny – if I didn't get to Confession the next Saturday (I'd just been to my 1st Confession the day before!).

Contrast my image of God to what our children experience during preparation for 1<sup>st</sup> Communion today: our 1<sup>st</sup> Communion liturgy is so beautiful, happy and joyful – celebrating such a different image of God – thanks to the influence of the second Vatican Council... and our Betty Drotar!

I can remember being taught that every time I committed a sin, God would put a black spot on my soul and I can remember always checking my stomach to see if there were any black spots there...

I often tell the story during Lent, of the time I went to a friend's house for lunch on a Friday. They were Protestants and his mom served us hot dogs and I was too embarrassed to tell her I couldn't eat meat on Friday... so, I – 9 or 10 years old – knew clearly that I had committed a mortal sin because #1) it was a major offense (on Fridays, we didn't even smell meat at my own house!); #2 I had proper reflection and #3) I gave full consent of my will! Thank God the next day was Saturday. I prayed that I wouldn't get hit by a car crossing Genesee Street in Fairmont on my way to Holy Family Church for Saturday Confessions!

Sisters and brothers, this was my relationship with the old white man with the long beard before I reach adolescence... just imagine what it was like during my adolescence...! but that's another story ...

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Brothers and sisters, I can laugh now, but it took years and years of studying and spiritual direction and prayer to get rid of that image in my head and my heart... and it was easier to get it out of my head than to finally recognize a new image with my heart. Our image of God is so crucial to our spiritual journey.

Some of us might remember that in the 1970s there was an emerging “God is dead” movement. Brothers and sisters, the God that many folks were imaging should have been dead...! I think that the God that many atheists imagine should be dead too; certainly their image of God has driven many from church... horrible and sick images of God have and continue to drive many from their faith.

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By now you might be wondering where I’m going with all of this!

Today’s Scripture invites us to image God as a Shepherd or Shepherdess, a very beautiful, powerful image of God... but to appreciate it, it would be helpful to have an understanding what it is like to be a Shepherd. Is there anyone here today that raises sheep?

We are all familiar with our Responsorial Psalm for today’s Liturgy – Psalm 23 (my favorite!) Scripture scholars today help us understand the shepherd in a more comprehensive way.

*“The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want”:*

To the extent that I am committed to God, my yearnings and desires, the hole in my soul is filled; I am at peace. Such a powerful image in our age of consumerism! Pope Francis, who is certainly a good Shepherd, describes our consumer culture in his Evangelical Exhortation on the environment: Laudato Si – Praised Be:

In ¶s 203 and 204, he states:

“Since the market tends to promote extreme consumerism in an effort to sell its products, people can easily get caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending... when people become self-centered and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person’s heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own or consume...

Obsession with the consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction.”

“The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want”!!

*“In verdant pastures, God gives me rest”:*

A good shepherd searches for rich, green pastures – not stony and full of weeds – where the sheep can eat and rest.

*“Beside restful waters God leads me”:*

Shepherds tell us that sheep won’t drink from running water, but need still pools of water, hence “beside restful water God leads me ... *God refreshes my soul.*”

*“God guides me in right paths for God’s name sake. Even if I walk the dark valley, I fear no evil for you are at my side with your rod and staff that give me courage”:*

Outside of Jerusalem there was a deep ravine that if a sheep fell into – it would be killed by the wolves which prowled there. But a good Shepherd would use his or her staff, with a hook on it, to lift the sheep out of the ravine and use the rod to push the wolves away. Our bishops today carry a ceremonial staff as a sign of their role...

*“You spread the table before me, in the sight of my foes”:*

A good shepherd would go ahead of the sheep, into the pastures and remove – with his staff – any poisonous plants that would make sheep sick... the “foes” would be the poisonous plants.

*“You anoint my head with oil”:*

As the sheep entered through the gate for the night, a good shepherd put ointment on any scratches or bruises that they might have incurred during day.

*“My cup overflows”:*

Waiting for the sheep at the gate, was a large bucket filled with water into which the good shepherd would dunk the sheep’s head to cool and sooth them after the heat of the day.

*“Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come” ... .. !*

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Sisters and brothers, while reflecting on images of God in preparation for today’s homily, I experienced a lot of gratitude for living in the Church in the Second Vatican Council Era – that in so many ways reveals to us – much more accurately the God that is revealed the Gospels... and, living at this moment of Pope Francis as he images – not only by his words but deeds – Jesus, The Good Shepherd: the merciful, compassionate, loving and just one.

The bottom line is: our Christian religion is good to the extent that it images the God of love, mercy and compassion. Religion is harmful to the extent that it images just the opposite!

During these summer days, when we might have a little more time, let us spend some of that time in prayer with Jesus, The Good Shepherd. We may want to use Psalm 23 as a help.

I'd like to include with one of my Father Anthony DeMello reflections from his book: The Song of the Bird, on the role of religion:

### Jesus at the Football Match

Jesus Christ said that he had never been to a football match. So we took him to one, my friends and I. We had hot dogs and cold beer; it was a ferocious battle between the Protestant Punchers and the Catholic Crusaders.

The Crusaders scored first. Jesus cheered wildly and threw his hat high up in the air. Then the Punchers scored. And Jesus cheered wildly and threw his hat high up in the air.

This seemed to puzzle the man behind us. He tapped Jesus on the shoulder and asked, 'Which side are you shouting for, my good man?'

'Me?' replied Jesus, now visibly excited by the game. 'Oh! I'm not shouting for either side. I'm just here to enjoy the game.'

The questioner turned to his neighbor and sneered, 'Hmm, an atheist!'

On the way back we briefed Jesus on the religious situation of the world today. 'It's a funny thing about religious people, Lord,' we said. 'They always seem to think that God is on their side and against the people on the other side.'

Jesus agreed. 'That is why I don't back Religions, I back people,' he said. 'People are more important than Religions. People are more important than the Sabbath.'

'You ought to watch your words,' one of us said with some concern. 'You were crucified once for saying that sort of thing, you know.'  
'Yes --- and by religious people,' said Jesus with a wry smile.

Amen!