

Old Testament Roots of the Good Shepherd Parable

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Introduction

From the beginning of time, God's call has created in human hearts the desire to follow him and, in the parable of the Good Shepherd, Jesus gives us a point of meeting between the human and the ineffable divine. The Good Shepherd parable found in John 10:1–16 is at the heart of our work in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd because it is fundamental to the young child's relationship with God.

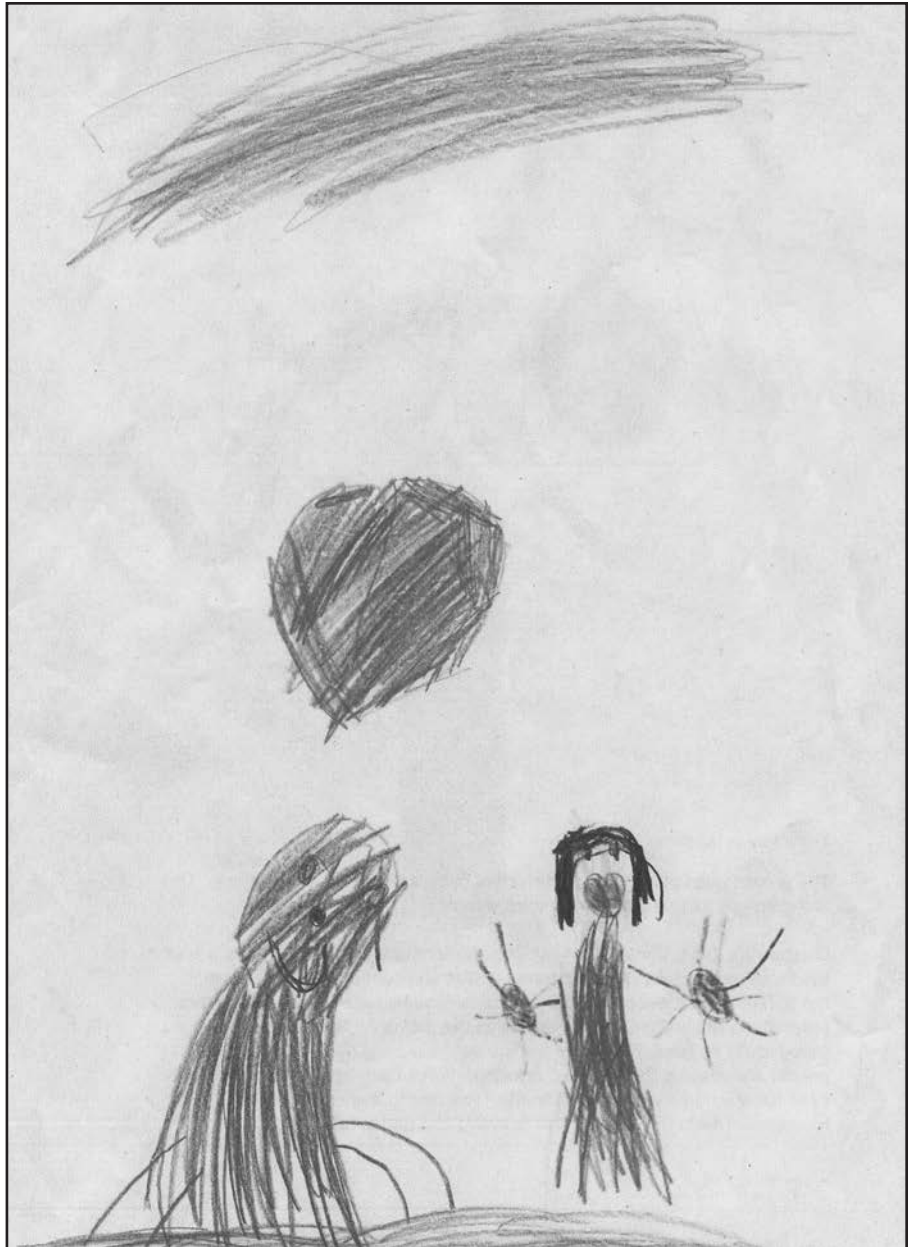
It is God who initiates this relationship. We hear the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls us by name, and we want to follow because we know his voice. And, in loving and following, we continually seek to know the Good Shepherd more and more.

It is in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament that we find the roots of the Good Shepherd parable and, in a sense, a window into the mind of Christ. Examining these Old Testament roots can help us better understand our own Christian faith and can make our relationship with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, come alive in new ways.

Jesus was a Jew who studied Torah. He proclaimed the words of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue. Jesus understood his relationship with the Father and his mission on earth in the light of his Jewish faith. When Jesus first proclaimed the parable of the Good Shepherd, each verse was laden with scriptural associations for his Jewish audience. The image of the shepherd had long been central to their relationship with God.

The Shepherd's Call in the Old Testament

"In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning" (John



*Jordan, age 5
St. Andrew's Episcopal School
Amarillo, Texas*

*("This is his heart. This is the sheep. This is me. I am a sheep, too."
Heart is red, sheep is brown, figure on the right has black hair,
a red dress, red smile, yellow face and hands.
On the bottom is green grass.)*

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1:1–2).¹ When God breathed the breath of life into Adam’s nostrils, his exhale called Adam into being. We might even imagine the exhaling of God’s breath as the first call of the Shepherd.

God called to Abram, *“Lekh lekha!”* “Go you forth from your land, from your kindred, from your father’s house, to the land that I will let you see.”² Abram goes, not asking why he is leaving, nor where he will go. Later God renewed his covenant with Abram, calling him by a new name—Abraham, declaring, “And to you and to your descendants after you, I shall give the country where you are now immigrants . . . to own in perpetuity. And I shall be their God” (Genesis 17:5, 8).

Moses was leading his flock when God called him by name and gave him a mission to free the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt and bring them to “a land flowing with milk and honey” (see Exodus 3:1–10, 17).

God works slowly, through time. Just as in the atrium we must be prepared gradually, through thousands of years God prepares his chosen people. Over and over the image of a shepherd is used to help understand the relationship being offered.

When Jacob gave his deathbed blessing to Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, he said, “. . . may God who has been my shepherd from my birth until this day, . . . bless these boys” (Genesis 48:15–16).

After the Hebrew people crossed the Red Sea and were about to embark on their long sojourn in the desert, God expresses reluctance to travel with them and calls them a stiff-necked people. Moses reminds God, “Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name and you have also found favor in my sight,’” and God is convinced, saying to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name” (see Exodus 33:1–17 NRSV).³

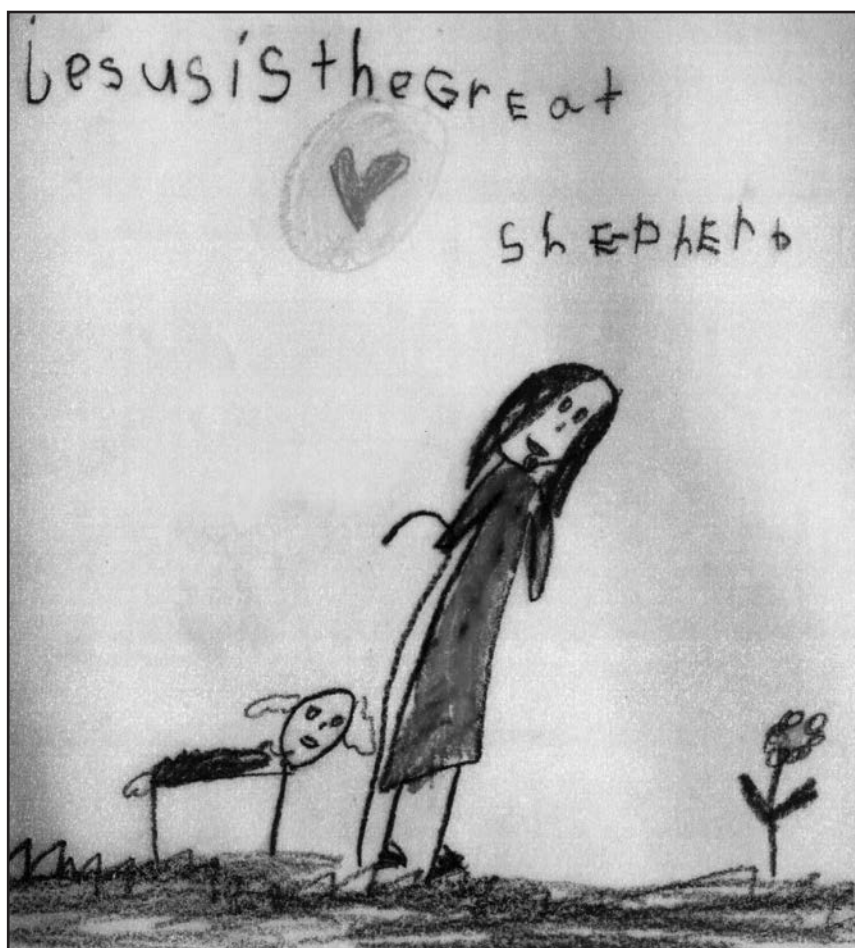
When Moses asked God to designate a new leader over the Hebrew people, again the image of the shepherd is used, “. . . who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep without a shepherd” (Numbers 27:17 NRSV).

When Israel needed a king to replace Saul, God sent Samuel to choose a shepherd-leader from among Jesse’s sons:

Jesse presented his seven sons to Samuel, but Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen these.” He then asked Jesse, “Are these all the sons you have?” He answered, “There is still one left, the youngest; he is out looking after the sheep.” . . . GOD said, “Come anoint him, for this is the one.” (1 Samuel 16:10–12).

And, the anointed shepherd-king, David, confidently and tenderly proclaims, “The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing” (Psalm 23:1).

By the time Ezekiel wrote from the Babylonian exile, the Jewish people knew well the qualities God expected from their



Madison, age 6
Sacred Heart Villa Preschool
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(Red heart enclosed in yellow circle. Shepherd’s robe is red. Grass is green.)

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leaders, whom God called “the shepherds of Israel” (Ezekiel 34:2). When those shepherds failed in their task and betrayed their own people, God called them to account in terms of the shepherd.

Shepherds, the Lord God says this: Trouble for the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Shepherds ought to feed their flock yet you have fed on milk, you have dressed yourselves in wool, you have sacrificed the fattest sheep, but failed to feed the flock. You have failed to make the weak sheep strong, or to care for the sick ones, or bandage the wounded ones. You have failed to bring back strays or look for the lost. . . . For lack of a shepherd they have scattered, to become the prey of any wild animal . . . my flock has been scattered all over the country; no one bothers about them and no one looks for them. (Ezekiel 34:2–6)

To rectify this situation, God takes a dramatic step:

I am going to look after my flock myself and keep all of it in view. As a shepherd keeps all his flock in view when he stands up in the middle of his scattered sheep, so shall I keep my sheep in view. I shall rescue them from wherever they have been scattered during the mist and darkness. . . . I shall gather them together . . . and bring them back to their own land. I shall pasture them on the mountains of Israel, . . . I shall feed them in good pasturage; . . . I myself will pasture my sheep, I myself will show them where to rest . . . I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong. I shall watch over the fat and healthy. I shall be a true shepherd to them. (Ezekiel 34:11–16)

God ended his proclamation by renewing his promises to Israel:

And men will learn that I, their God, am with them and that they, the House of Israel, are my people. . . . And you, my sheep, are the flock I shall pasture, and I am your God—it is the LORD GOD who speaks. (Ezekiel 34:30–31)

With all of this in mind, Jesus stands in Solomon’s portico in the Temple and proclaims the Good Shepherd parable on the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple, which commemorated

the purification of the Temple after its profanation.⁴ According to an ancient source, the liturgy for the Dedication called for the reading of Scripture passages with the shepherd as their central theme.⁵ This feast offered an opportunity for Jesus to present himself as the antithesis of those shepherds who fed only themselves. His listeners know Ezekiel 34, and in John 10:11 we hear Jesus declare boldly, “I am the good shepherd.”

The Destination: Life to the Full

To hear the Good Shepherd call us by name is an indescribable joy. We might require nothing else of life, only to hear his voice. Yet the Shepherd’s call is linked inextricably to other words of Jesus in John 10:3: “one by one he calls his own sheep *and leads them out*” (emphasis added). For what? “I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). What is this full life?

Again, if we return to the Old Testament, we find help to understand God’s vision. In the second book of Samuel, God says to David:

The LORD GOD says this: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be leader of my people

Israel; I have been with you on all your expeditions; . . . I will provide a place for my people Israel; . . . and they shall dwell in that place and never be disturbed again; . . . I will give them rest. . . . (2 Samuel 7:8–11)

Later, during the exile, when the Jews wondered whether the nation of Israel was dead, God reassures them that he has not forgotten his promises, and he intends to keep them:

Thus says the LORD GOD: I am going to open your graves, . . . O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, . . . I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD. . . . Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your children’s children shall live there forever; and my

Having presented the Epiclesis, the catechist asked, “What does this gesture mean?” Callum replied, “God loves us and gives us everything.”

—Callum, age 6
Church of Our Savior
Chicago, Illinois

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servant David shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Ezekiel 37:12–27 NRSV)

Life to the full is, first of all, life. Ezekiel's vision of Israel's resurrection from the valley of dry bones can be seen as a re-enactment of God's creation of Adam. God calls the people of Israel back to life with his spirit, the breath of life, to live, no longer captive, but as free people in an everlasting covenant relationship with God.

In the Good Shepherd parable, Jesus says, "I am the gate." What is the function of a gate? Compare John 10:9—"Anyone who enters through me . . . will go freely in and out," with Ezekiel 34:27—"And men will learn that I am LORD when I break their yoke straps and release them from their captors." Both offer freedom through relationship with God.

After God freed the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt their journey toward freedom became more an inner than an outer journey. Long after they left Egypt their experience as slaves still held them captive. They knew what they had been freed from but not what they had been freed for. They had no way to understand what it meant to be free people in relationship with God. Similarly, Jesus's Death and Resurrection freed us from the bondage of sin and death, to allow us to live

"The Three Moments: Creation,
Redemption, and Parousia"
In the days of old,
The Bible told,
How Abraham did not withdraw,
Anything from God.
Not even his beloved son,
Because he knew God made
everything turn out fun.
And then Redemption,
Death and Resurrection,
Of Jesus Christ in the New
Testament,
Who sacrificed himself for the
Father,
Not to any other.
And Parousia the prophets tell,
About how there will be no hell,
Light in everything, God in all.

*Nelle, age 9
Holy Trinity Catholic Church
Lenexa, Kansas*

in intimate relationship with him. Yet, we sense that we still have not truly understood or accepted the freedom being offered. We don't live fully with God or with each other. What holds us captive? What prevents us from living life to the full?

An event in Jesus's life may help us better understand what he is offering as the Good Shepherd. After announcing the Good Shepherd parable at the Temple, Jesus escapes arrest and goes to the far side of the Jordan. There he hears from Lazarus's sisters that his friend Lazarus is ill, "Lord, the man you love is ill" (John 11:3).

By the time Jesus returns to Bethany, Lazarus is dead and Martha's words to Jesus echo thoughts many of us struggle with, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died. . . ." Martha then makes a statement of great faith: "but I know that, even now, whatever you ask of God, he will grant you." "Your brother" said Jesus to her "will rise again." Martha said, "I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said: "I am the resurrec-

tion. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:21–26).

Do we believe it? Really? What does it mean for us today? What does it mean for those who are alive but not living life to the full as offered by Jesus? The snide remarks of some onlookers give voice to our own doubts, "He opened the eyes of the blind man, could he not have prevented this man's death?" (John 11:37).

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As Jesus approaches the tomb, we are told he “cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, here! Come out!’” (John 11:43). Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls Lazarus by name and leads him out. “The dead man came out, his feet and hands bound with bands of stuff and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, let him go free.’” (John 11:44).

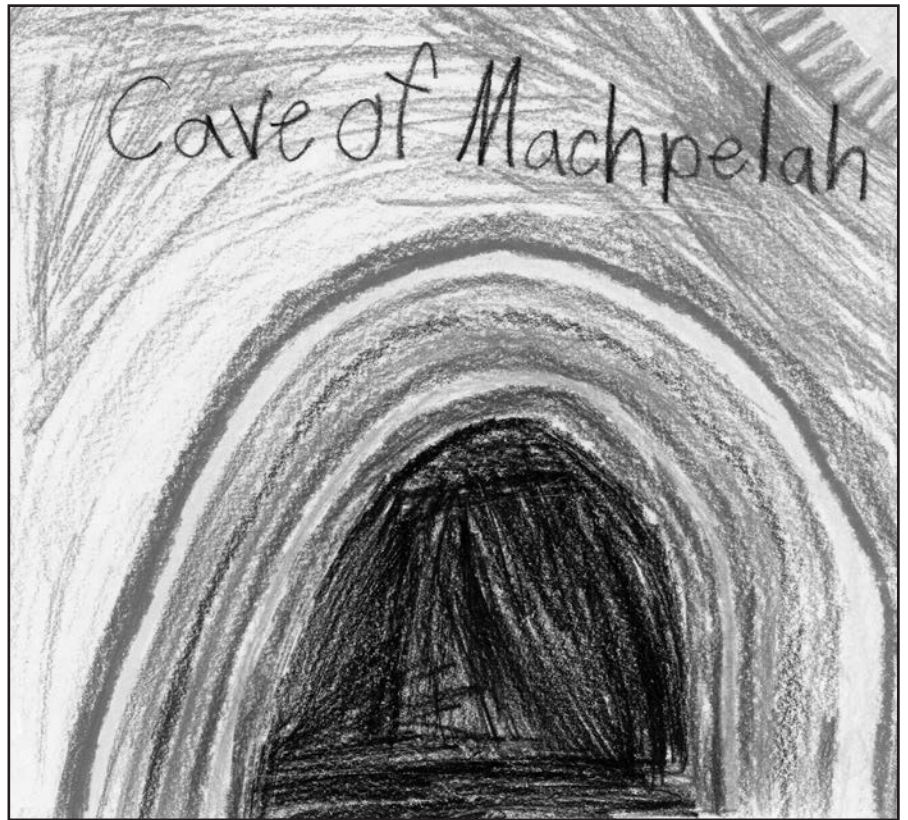
However we are bound and wherever we are held captive, Jesus also cries out to each one of us, by name and in a loud voice. Moving hesitantly, fearfully, cloth strips falling away, we stumble blinking into the light and Jesus says, “Unbind her. Let her go free.”

Conclusion

In their atrium in Rome, the children led Gianna Gobbi and Sofia Cavalletti to discover this centrality of the Good Shepherd. Cavalletti, a Hebrew scholar, saw that, just as the covenant between God and the people of Israel is the basis of Jewish life, the relationship with the Good Shepherd is the basis of the Christian faith. Cavalletti writes:

The religious experience . . . coincides with the most essential vital exigence, in that it is an experience of love. The Good Shepherd “gives his life for his sheep,” and he came so that “they may have life, and have it abundantly”; the parable announces to us a plentitude of love that coincides with a plentitude of life.⁶

What is the life to which Jesus leads us? The children show us the answer: abundant life and abundant love in relationship with the Good Shepherd, and, through him, with God, each other, and all humanity. Our task—our calling, if you will—is to sustain our own relationship with the Good Shepherd, following in the footsteps of the Jewish people, our elder brothers and sisters in the faith, heeding his call out of whatever binds us and holds us captive, becoming free forever-more-abundant life and love with him.



*Elizabeth, age 10
St. Timothy Catholic School
Mesa, Arizona
(Center is black, surrounded by a rainbow,
blue sky, and yellow sun.)*

¹ Scripture citations and references, unless otherwise indicated, are given from *The Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1974).

² *The Schocken Bible, Volume 1, The Five Books of Moses*, a new translation with introductions, commentary, and notes by Edward Fox (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), Genesis 12:1.

³ *The New Revised Standard Version Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁴ See: John 10:22–23 and 1 Maccabees 4:36, 2 Maccabees 10:1–8.

⁵ Sofia Cavalletti, *History's Golden Thread* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999), 143–144.

⁶ Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 26.