

The church where I was baptized had, like so many others, a stained glass window of Jesus the Good Shepherd, carrying a lamb tenderly in the crook of his arm, leading other attentive sheep through a peaceful pasture.

It was a lovely and calming picture, strategically positioned in the cry room for fussy lambs, an image long cherished in the art and architecture and other forms of prayer life throughout church history.

It comes from this tenth chapter of John, in which Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep even to the point of laying down his life for them.

He is echoing Psalm 23 and a long, rich tradition of Jewish imagination that the Messiah of God would be a shepherd from the cloth of King David, defending and leading his people like the boy with the flocks who became the hero of the nation.

This is the hope that flickers hot on the lips of those asking Jesus whether he is the Messiah, the question he has been dancing around, the question he has been raising in the hearts of so many hearers and followers gathered around him like sheep, or perhaps lemmings.

The questioners are not as taken with this shepherd image as the church later became.

He does not appear to them strong and gentle and clean and Scandinavian; he is dusty and suspicious with just another ordinary Jewish face.

He is not a voice of comfort, but of frustration.

How long will you keep us in suspense, they ask, in the Greek idiom that literally and quite ironically means, *How long will you take away our life?*

They are tired of the tap-dancing and the symbolic double talk, the nuanced hints and the non-committal responses.

Tell us plainly, they demand, like so many of us do, which is one reason why mystics and communities that openly wrestle with hard questions instead of dispensing easy answers generally aren't the ones building huge church complexes in the suburbs.

Continually listening to a voice, which might say anything in any tone at any time, takes a lot more work and trust and attention than just believing or saying the right things; rules are always simpler than relationship, and guidelines are always easier to follow than a good shepherd.

It is why we need Malia Randle and other fussy lambs not off in some cry room but here in the midst of the assembly, to keep teaching us that content is overrated, that we do better not to listen for the right words but rather to listen for the right voice.

This is particularly important, the gospel writer John would say, because our ears are more trustworthy than our eyes.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

Blessed are we because our eyes can deceive us.

Our eyes want to see Jesus the Shepherd in the tranquil stained glass window, which is like looking at marriage in a Hallmark store...a nice glimpse to be sure, maybe even accurate now and then, but so incomplete.

The window quickly becomes rose tinted glass.

Jesus quickly becomes static and soft, and then so does our faith.

It is why we need to keep peering into the strange colors of the biblical text, and also to close our eyes and listen deeply to it in case John is right that our ears are wiser than our eyes.

In this gospel text, the conflict in the conversation makes our ears bristle.

If you don't hear it, listen to what immediately follows the reading:

The Jews took up stones again to stone him.

Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father.

For which of these are you going to stone me?"

(They) answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God...."

They also tried to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.

It's not exactly the sweetly peaceful Good Shepherd scene my eyes remember.

King David, the prototype of the Messiah, was the stone thrower, not the target.

Jesus isn't the Messiah in the eyes of those around him; he's Goliath.

They see him as a threat to faith and to the safety of God's people.

The last time someone made claims like this in the temple, it was a Greek ruler named Antiochus Epiphanes.

He set up a huge statue of himself, naked and glorious with exaggerated features, and demanded to be worshiped as God.

When the Jews refused, he seized the temple and slaughtered a pig in the Holy of Holies, the abominable desecration that led to rebellion.

The uprising was won miraculously by the upstart Jews, led by Judas Maccabeus, and the Temple was cleansed and rededicated to the one true God.

Now known as Hanukkah, this was the occasion for the festival of the Dedication, the Jewish celebration of God's victory over a blasphemer.

When Jesus says quite plainly "The Father and I are one" into the Temple's holiday air, the faithful Jews around him are ready to slaughter him.

In such a frenzy, it is hard to hear the shepherd's voice.

It is hard for us too, in the throes of conflict and chaos and deeply felt threats to what we believe to be true and hold so dear, to keep listening.

It is hard even to trust our ears.

Our best and real hope, actually, is not in our eyes or in our ears.

It is in the eyes and ears of the Shepherd.

Our hope is in the promise that Jesus sees and hears and pays attention to us.

He holds us close, assuring us that no one will snatch us out of his hand, even those whose hands he himself escapes.

And rather than set up a statue, rather than raise up stones, he lays down his life.

When we picture him in our stained glass imaginations, we see a shepherd.

When heaven itself pictures him in its golden dreams, it introduces the mighty lion of Judah.

But the One who appears is a slaughtered Lamb.

The Good Shepherd turns out to be a crucified Christ, a butchered and bloody mess, terrible in its gruesome beauty.

All heaven gathers round and cheers the Good Shepherd who is actually murdered mutton.

And do you not know, Paul asks with the haunting clarity of one whose own scaly eyes were crucified and raised, that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death?

Those of us who follow this Shepherd track the dangerous path of the cross.

Those dazzling around him were whitened only with the deep red blood of suffering and slaughter.

They were martyred, butchered, murdered for their faith in Christ.

But they were not snatched out of his hand.

They were not spared hunger and thirst and tears, but they did have those tears wiped from their unreliable eyes by the very fingers of God.

Malia's face will soon be wet too, a foreshadowing of tears and terrors to come, because the Good Shepherd does not magically insulate us from life or from death.

But he does carry us.

There's no telling where Malia's journey will take her anymore than there was predicting our own; we have no idea what will happen to her.

But we know what will not.

No one will ever snatch her from her Good Shepherd's hand.