

[Readings: Acts 4:8-12; Psalm 118; 1 John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18]

Today is “Good Shepherd Sunday” as well as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. It could easily be called “Good *and* Bad Shepherds Sunday” because there’s almost as much in the readings about bad shepherds as well as good ones. In the bad category are the leaders and elders of the people. In our First Reading from Acts, St. Peter accuses them to their faces of not recognizing what was plain as day: Jesus is the Messiah and through Him alone comes salvation.

Our Second Reading from the First Letter of John ups the ante by implicating “the whole world” in not knowing Christ. And in today’s Gospel, Jesus Himself says the hired shepherd really doesn’t care about the sheep and abandons his protective role at the first sign of danger -- and thereby condemns the same authorities Peter would later have in his sights.

Which brings us to the good -- the ones who like Peter and the first disciples obeyed God and not men; like the early believers who knew Christ and thereby became children of God and members of the flock the Good Shepherd tends and for which He lays down His life.

What kind of shepherds people need and what kind of flocks they will be are good questions to ask. In the Good Shepherd story, forget about the hired man, the sheep, and the wolf. We know the wolf will attack, the hired help will bolt, and the vulnerable sheep are in danger. Those characters play to type predictably. As in a movie, the bad guy moves in for the kill, the working stiff saves himself, and the victim is exposed.

The good shepherd, meanwhile, does the courageous thing: risks his life for the sheep that belong to him. In the movie version, we’d expect this too: The hero would put himself or herself in harm’s way because someone is in need. We’d expect the hero to win, or it wouldn’t be a satisfying movie. Yet sometimes the hero dies in rescuing the vulnerable one. While this makes the ending

Bittersweet, we learn that self-sacrifice is a recognizable part of the code of good storytelling. But do you know what? The most curious detail of this story isn’t about the wolf, the hired man, the flock, or even the shepherd’s sacrifice.

It's about those other sheep that don't belong to this fold. The sacrifice of Jesus isn't just for the flock in plain sight, but for these mysterious "others" too. Scholars have identified the mystery sheep as future believers – like us. Before we were born, Jesus accepted death for our sake. These "others," however, might also be the non-Jewish Christians who came to faith after the time of Jesus. The Church has pretty much evolved into a Church of Gentiles.

It's also possible that the "other sheep" refer to believers who, by the generation of this Gospel, were already out there, sharing the faith of the apostles but separate from the ways of the community of St. John. More importantly, the "other sheep" could include other groups who live Christ-like lives outside the boundaries of the formal, Christian Church. The Good Shepherd may well have plenty of flocks we haven't yet approached! "Anonymous Christians."

You and I are both called to know and to be "Good Shepherds." The title is not limited to Jesus Christ alone, nor is limited only to popes, bishops and priests. It means each one of us who has responsibility over others: at work, at school, at play, even in the marketplace. Wherever the providence of God has put you, you are challenged to be a Good Shepherd to those around you. As a spouse, as a parent, as a grandparent, as a brother or sister, as a professional or semi-professional. Peter and John tell us how to do this in today's readings.

How am I a good shepherd? How do lay down my life for my flock?

Do the people come to know God through knowing me?

Am I a healing presence to others? Do I help reconcile people to God and one another? Do I lead others to trust in God's love and mercy?

There are so many alien voices calling out to vulnerable sheep. Some of those alien voices are evil voices disguised a soft, harmonious voices in our movies and in our television programs (except for EWTN and CTND which always tell the truth!). The challenge for you and me is to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd (in the Church), follow His lead (in the Bible), and have an eternally happy ending to our earthly pilgrimage. AMEN! ALLELUIA!