

**ONE FLOCK, ONE SHEPHERD**  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

*Based on Psalm 23 and \*John 10:11-16. Jesus, the Good Shepherd.*

*\*translation below*

About fifteen years ago, two of my favorite theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker embarked on an artistic quest through the Mediterranean. They were seeking the earliest expressions of Christian art and how those forms of art depicted Jesus. They were imagining what that art might have to say about the liturgical and ethical formation of the early Christians for whom this art was created.

Perhaps more importantly, they were also exploring what the liturgical and ethical formation of early Christians might have to say to *us*: twenty-first century American Christians celebrating “Earth Day Sunday” on this Fourth Sunday in the Season of Easter. A Sunday that has us reading Psalm 23 year after year, alongside a lection from John’s Gospel describing Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

The two scholars (whose findings are compiled into a massive tome titled *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (emphasis added)) embarked on their exploration of early Christian art with the explicit expectation of discovering the manner in which early Christians portrayed the *Crucifixion*. Meaning that they expected to discover early Christian renderings of a suffering, dying Jesus. On a cross.

Instead, the sanctuaries they explored reveal images of a Jesus who was very much *alive*. Surrounded by a lavish and vibrant natural world that was *also* very much alive. And it just so happens that the most popular early church portrayal of Jesus is the image we celebrate on this Good Shepherd Sunday: a glorified Christ surrounded by adoring sheep grazing in green pastures, with lushly painted gardens enveloping the entire community of faith as they gathered for worship. The image reinforced by written quotations from Psalm 23.

Imagine, if you will, a similar scene in our sanctuary: the wall behind the organ filled from top to bottom with a vision of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, his hands outstretched in the radical hospitality we claim as one of our values; our windows along the sides of the sanctuary saturated in ivy; with four aisles (instead of three) flowing symbolically with living water, as if they are the four rivers flowing in the Garden of Eden described in Genesis 2.

Imagine this sensory imagery shaping our experience of worship. We would feel as if we were worshiping in Paradise, would we not?

This is, in fact, the conclusion of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker upon viewing sanctuary after sanctuary of early Christian art. Over and over again they discover churches drenched in a lush visual garden of grace. As they imagine what it would be like to worship in these churches, they realize the dominant sensory experience of early Christianity is the recovery of “Paradise.” *Gan-eden* in the Hebrew. The Garden of Eden.

Not Lost. Not in need of a cross to cover the sin. But *Found!*

Of course we all, to this day, dream of “Paradise Found” as an archetypal image of the heavenly realm. We might conclude this early Christian art is an escapist attempt to deny the suffering of this world in favor of a

future fulfillment. But when Brock and Parker broaden their study to include ancient liturgies and ritual practices and prayers of the early church, they realize the permeation of paradise in the liturgical life of early Christians is meant to reinforce the reality of Paradise – *gan-eden – here and now*.

Baptismal liturgies used in the fourth century by Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem openly describe this water-based ritual as a “portal to Paradise” through which disciplined, dedicated catechumens renounce their greed and their fear and their violence. Through the water-based ritual of baptism, disciplined, dedicated catechumens renounce their desire for the power to dominate others and their rage against the powers that have dominated *them*.

After a great season of thorough preparation, these disciplined dedicated catechumens literally strip themselves of the greed and fear and violence that permeates their way of life by removing their clothing and sinking, naked, into the baptismal water of *gan-eden*. The Living Water of Paradise. Then they emerge on the other side of these waters as a new *adam-from-the-adamah* – or *human-from-the-humus* – passing through the gate of the garden of the Good Shepherd, dripping with the waters of re-creation.

Upon rising from the baptismal waters as this new creation – which is really a re-creation of what God intended *homo sapiens* to be all along – these dedicated disciplined catechumens are clothed with new robes and escorted to the feast of Paradise—their first Holy Communion—chanting Psalm 23 as they process to the table:

*The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. God leads me through the still water. God prepares a table before me. ... God anoints my head with oil.*

The newly baptized – who have renounced greed and fear and violence and domination – then gather with the rest of the community around the table for the Eucharist, sharing the bread and wine of paradise. And, get this, the bishop declared these new baptized members of the church to be *grafted to the tree of life* at the center of the garden! Firmly rooted. Forever in *Paradise*.

Wow! *This* is what it means to be Christian in the early church! Imagine if this is what it meant to be Christian today!

But even in the rituals of the early church the portal to Paradise is not just a moment in time, not just a one-and-done rite of passage into some sort of mystery cult that you and I mere mortals could not and would not wish to enter. It is absolutely a struggle for these new members of the community to *stay* rooted in the Paradise to which they had been grafted, just as it is a struggle for you and I to maintain our values day in and day out.

We have to “practice Paradise” every time we gathered to worship God. In fact, that is the heart of what it means to be the church. And so the ritualized practices of the community develops over time to cultivate within us a commitment to the ethical grace of learning once and for all how to live together as one flock among many in the generous garden of God.

Now this may sound like a highly idealized view of early Christianity. But consider, if you will, how our worldview would shift, how our environmental ethics would shift, if we really did worship the God of the garden, rather than the Lord of the laptop.

(And believe me, especially in this COVID era, I *love* my laptop!)

The thing is, we really have been created by the God of this good garden we call planet earth to live in perpetual Paradise with God and with one another. We really have.

And the thing is, we really do need to fundamentally shift our vision away from the assumption of Paradise Lost to the ethical imperative of Paradise Found. Because we really were formed as creatures of this earth, humans from the humus, *adam* from the *adamah* in the Hebrew.

And we really do present the practical gifts of Paradise in our Sacramental use of water and bread and wine. I think we do this because deep down in the part of us that is not yet in complete denial that we are fundamentally creatures of the earth *we know that we cannot take these gifts for granted!* That water and bread and wine really are “sacred.” A sign and a seal of God’s grace given to us. In abundance. In Paradise.

If Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker are right (and I think they are), then the Sacrament of Baptism really *was* designed to serve for us as a portal to Paradise. And if they are right, then the Sacrament of Communion we will celebrate next week really *is* offered to us as the feast of Paradise, training us to treat the well-being of the grape and the grain with the same reverence we want the grain and the grape to treat *us*.

Perhaps I am naïve, but I would like to hope that we twenty-first century Christians already living the crisis of climate change just might start to live differently if we truly trusted the Good Shepherd to supply our need and not just our want. If we truly envisioned our baptism grafting us into the tree of life at the center of Paradise, as one species in one flock with one Shepherd of us all.

Naïve or not this really is the invitation from our Good Shepherd on this Earth Day Sunday here at Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church:

That we celebrate the Paradise God has given the entire flock – and not just *homo sapiens* – in this good creation. That we claim ourselves rooted and grounded at the center of the garden, unable to be who we really are without it. And that we re-commit ourselves to our part in saving this Paradise one baptism and one holy communion at a time.

Let the church say, Amen!

John 10:11-16

Jesus says,

“I am the good shepherd.  
The good shepherd serves the sheep with their heart and soul.

“The hired hand,  
who is not the shepherd  
(the sheep ultimately belong to someone else)  
sees the predator coming and runs away –  
leaving the sheep to roam on their own –  
and the predator snatches some of them up,  
and frightens others away.

“The hired hand runs away

because a hired hand is not  
personally invested in the sheep.

“I am the good shepherd.  
My soul is intertwined with those I serve,  
Just as the soul of Abba God is intertwined with mine  
and mine with God’s.  
I serve the sheep from the depths of my heart and soul.

“I also have other sheep from other pastures.  
I must lead them also.  
They, too, will respond to my voice.  
One day will become one flock, one shepherd.”