Hi,

Today’s updates:

* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.
* I’ve been told that my YouTube page/channel can be hard to find. A simple solution would be to [go to the link (here)](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChtwqaUcpZbwyTWnkp6INwQ?view_as=subscriber) and then bookmark the page or subscribe to my channel. Also -- all the “covid” Sunday classes since March are on the YouTube page, not the Vimeo page we used when we were meeting in person (the archived videos are all still there, going back a number of years). One of these days, I’ll figure out how to also post the Sunday “covid” videos on Vimeo. . . . one day. ;)

I bet there have been at least a few times in the past few months that all you wanted was a shepherd, someone to lead you through this Time of Virus. We have one and, today, we will turn to our Good Shepherd.

**Psalm 23 (NRSV)**

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.**

**He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.**

**He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.**

**Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me.**

**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.**

**John 10:7-15 (NRSV)**

**So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.**

**“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”**

The Bible has sometimes been described as a beautiful mosaic. Each piece, each small section, is wondrous and stirring on its own, but the true depth and brilliance of the mosaic can be appreciated only after stepping back and taking in the whole.

Similarly, Psalm 23 and today’s passage from John can be read and appreciated in and of themselves. Who would not be comforted by the words of the psalmist? Who could not embrace a shepherd who gives abundant life? Yet, the richness of Jesus’ images in John 10 can only be grasped by considering other uses of shepherd imagery in the Bible. Indeed, it would be a good idea to read the two text boxes before going on.

*Caring for the sheep*

Shepherds care for the sheep. They lead the sheep (v.2 of Psalm 23; 10:3 in John). They provide food (v.1 and 10:9) and protect them (v.4 and 10:12-13). The shepherds do all this so that the sheep will live (v. 3, 10:10). Of the herd animals, sheep are in particular need of this care for they’ve lost the ability to defend themselves. Some sheep herders have even taken to mixing llamas into the herds because llamas are tougher and more combative. The llamas will form protective circles in the face of a predator, or at least run away. Sheep do none of that. They are utterly dependent on the shepherd and, to quote Shakespeare, “there’s the rub.” All this shepherd imagery is wonderfully warm and comforting, but it leads us to what we most want to ignore: *our dependence upon God*.

After all, we’re the cowboys, not the sheep. We stand ready to feed ourselves, defend ourselves, and make our own way in the world. We were taught self-reliance. When facing a problem, we pick ourselves up, devise a solution and press on. In the stirring words of Henley’s *Invictus*, we are the captains of our fates and the masters of our souls. This is our way. This is the American way.

Yet, we know that in the end our self-reliance will fail us. We can’t accumulate enough wealth to forestall sorrow. There is no doctor who can prevent our death. We can’t have enough police to stop crime or armies to prevent war. We think we don’t need a shepherd when, in truth, we do. We imagine that the wolf is our problem, when it actually the shepherd’s.

*The Good Shepherd*

In a long-distant election, one of the gubernatorial candidates kept telling me that he wanted to be my good shepherd. I always wanted to shout back at the television, “The job is taken!”

As a good shepherd, Jesus leads his flock into the safety of the pen (10:2). But unlike any other shepherd, Jesus is the very gate to the pen. He and no other is the way into the safety of the pen (v. 9a) and out to the luxurious forage of the pasture (9b). He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). The world is filled with many who want to steal and to kill and to destroy. But Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, is the bringer of life, abundant life, life that can be given me by no one else.

I’m not sure what counts as an abundant life for sheep. It is probably just getting fat and being safe. But for us, this abundant life – life lived to the full -- that Jesus offers us is life at its barely imagined best.

How is this abundant life to be ours? Who can ensure that it will not be snatched away?

Good shepherds are willing to defend their flocks, even putting themselves at some risk. But I doubt that many shepherds have died defending their sheep and even those that did, never intended to die. Yet, as God’s anointed shepherd, Jesus does not merely risk his life for his flock, he willingly lays it down for us, saving us because we cannot save themselves.

Thus, we can rest in knowing that our Good Shepherd restores our soul and leads us down the right paths.

In him, we shall never want.

*A bit more on the Shepherds of Israel*

Ezekiel 34 is by far the most important scriptural background for today’s passage from the Gospel of John. Throughout the ancient Near East, including Israel, the shepherd was a metaphor for the kings and their responsibilities to guide, protect, and care for their people. Ezekiel 34 opens with God’s indictment of Israel’s shepherds:

“Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? . . . I am against the shepherds . . . I will rescue my sheep from their mouths . . .”

God will take over the shepherding of God’s people:

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak . . .”

And how will God shepherd his people?

“I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them: I the Lord, have spoken.”

Since David, son of Jesse and second king of the united Israel, had died centuries before Ezekiel, he cannot be who God has in mind as the servant who will shepherd God’s people. Rather, this servant shepherd will come from David’s royal line.

Thus, when Jesus says “I am the Good Shepherd,” he is not only calling on the imagery of God as the Good Shepherd in Psalm 23, but also on the imagery from Ezekiel of the coming prince, the anointed one, the Messiah, who will shepherd the people as the young David once shepherded his flocks of sheep.

Reading Scripture is an art that is always made richer and more rewarding when we can make connections between Scripture passages and see how seemingly isolated stories and passages are influenced by a larger biblical unity. A good study Bible will help you to see these connections, particularly if it has a lot of cross-references.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott