

The Good Shepherd  
John 10:14-16; John 3:17  
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I have a wonderful friend who is a Jew. She is the hardest working person I know, and she is filled with kindness. She is also a brilliant scholar. Despite the fact that she is Jewish, her doctorate was in Theology and Religious Studies and she wrote her dissertation on one of the early Christian church fathers. On Facebook, she shares her struggles with physical therapy after a recent injury, and she posts pictures of her cat and his supposed thoughts about the day ahead. She also posts encouragements that I find deeply moving – not the kind of thing you would see on a Hallmark greeting card, but thoughts that send me deeper. This week I told her, “I love your Facebook ministry.” She responded, “I’m not sure it’s a ministry, but it’s part of who I am: a Jewish, mostly (?) atheist person who loves all of this.” I love her dearly.

What happens to her when she dies?

I know this is a question you care about, because some of you ask me. What happens to non-Christians when they die? Can they go to heaven? Some of you don’t ask at all because you are afraid of the answer. We all have someone we care about who is not Christian. Mostly it’s our own children and grandchildren. We got them up on Sunday morning, week after week, year after year, and made them wear something presentable and took them to church from the time they were little. We taught them to put something in the offering plate, and we admired what they made in Sunday School. We did our best to teach them the faith that means so much to us. And we are heartsick to think of what it means for their souls that they have fallen away from faith.

What happens to them when they die?

The Bible does not have just one answer for us. You know that there are many verses that talk about heaven like it is an exclusive country club where the riffraff can’t get in. The Gospel of John is filled with this call to us to choose. Walk in the darkness or walk in the light. Only those who understand that Jesus is the revelation of God Almighty can have eternal life, this gospel tells us. But – in this as in so many things – the Bible speaks with more than one voice, and even the Gospel of John, this gospel that is all about choosing light or darkness, even THIS gospel offers us a different view.

In today’s text, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as God knows me and I know God. And I lay down my life for the sheep.” Notice he says I lay down my life for THE sheep, not for MY sheep. Then he goes on to say, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

Right here, in the very middle of this gospel that is all about making a choice to follow Jesus or not, right HERE is this hopeful passage – “I have other sheep who are not of this fold.”

We can also turn to John 3:17 that we heard a moment ago. You know verse 16 that comes before it: “For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” We memorized this as children, and it came to haunt some of us later. What about those who don’t believe? What if we ourselves are experiencing doubt?

Well, immediately after this famous verse, Jesus goes on to say, “Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” The word for “world” here is “kosmos,” meaning all of Creation. And the word for saved is “sothe,” meaning “to heal.” God did not send the Son into Creation to condemn it, but in order that all of Creation might be healed. That is a wholly different understanding of Jesus’ purpose on earth than the one most of us received as children.

What do we do when the Bible tells us two conflicting things? We have to discern what is true for ourselves. That is a big responsibility, but we have some tools at our disposal. They are called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral because this was the way John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, approached discernment. This quadrilateral offers us four tools for discernment: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. We use these tools together, and prayerfully, to discern for ourselves what is true, or to discern together what God would have us do as a church.

1. **Scripture** is first. What does the Bible say? In this case, the Bible tells us different and opposing things about what happens after we die, and there are other similar texts throughout the Bible. We cannot come to a conclusion about what happens after death based on scripture alone.
2. Second, the Christian **tradition** on the matter of salvation is also mixed. You know that there are centuries of tradition saying only believers will go to heaven, and that is probably what you learned as a child. But the Christian tradition is more than that. Christian scholars for more than a century have argued that it is not in God’s nature to condemn anyone, but rather to heal us all. Like scripture, the Christian tradition gives us a mixed answer to our question.
3. Third, our **reason** may have something to say as well. We can ask ourselves, if God is a shepherd to us, how would a shepherd act?
4. Finally, we can turn to our own **experience**, and in this case, I mean our experience of God. What is God like? How has God acted in our own lives? If we have experienced that God is love, as we read in 1 John, then we can expect that God will behave in the same way toward the friends and children and grandchildren that we love and that we are concerned about.

Now, WE come to church because this is where God calls us to be, and we should follow that call. We feel God’s love in the relationships we find here. This is where we worship and where we are privileged to share in God’s work. But not everyone is called to be here, and they are God’s children, too. They are Jesus’ sheep, too, and he is the good shepherd for them as well, willing to lay down his life to protect them.

I don’t worry about my Jewish friend, or about my children, who don’t go to church anymore, despite my best efforts. God loves them at least as much as I do. They are safe in God’s hands.

You can rest easy about your own children, too. Jesus is the good shepherd who will lead them safely home.

Amen