

8 May 2022

Acts 9:36-43  
Revelation 7:9-17  
John 10:22-30

*Knock, knock.*<sup>1</sup>

Who's there?

*I'm a great big **gorilla**  
with fat furry arms  
and huge white teeth.  
When you let me in,  
I'm going to hug your breath away!*

Then I **won't** let you in!

*Knock, knock.*

Who's there?

*I'm a wicked old **witch**  
with a long pointed hat  
and a wand full of magic.  
When you let me in,  
I'm going to turn you into a frog!*

Then I **won't** let you in!

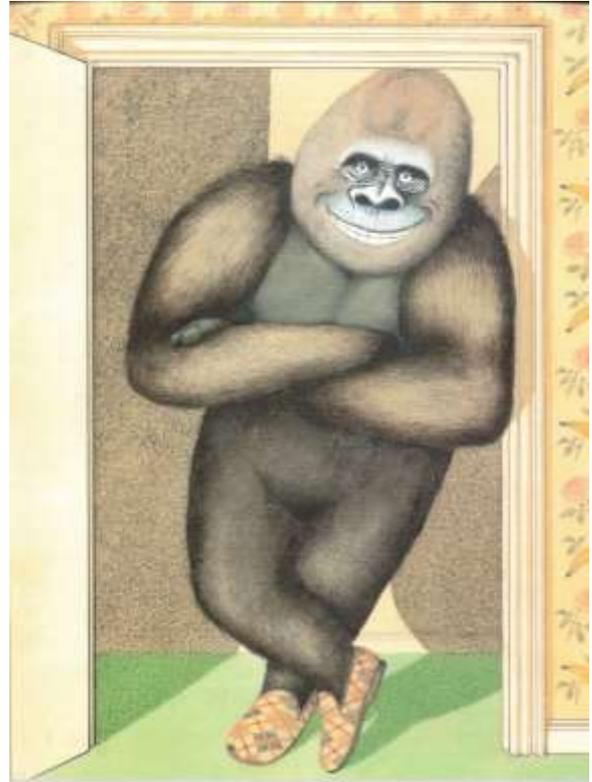
*Knock, knock.*

Who's there?

*I'm a very creepy **ghost**  
with a face as white as a sheet  
and chains that jangle and clank.  
When you let me in,  
I'm going to spook you!*

Then I **won't** let you in!

*Knock, knock.*



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<sup>1</sup> *Knock Knock Who's There?*, text by Sally Grindley, illustrations by Anthony Browne, Mammoth, 1985. The metaphor of nightmare used throughout this sermon was prompted by Wright, *Revelation*, pp.73, 76.

Who's there?

*I'm a fierce scaly **dragon**  
with smoke up my nose  
and fire in my mouth.  
When you let me in,  
I'm going to cook you for my tea!*  
Then I **won't** let you in!

*Knock, knock.*

Who's there?

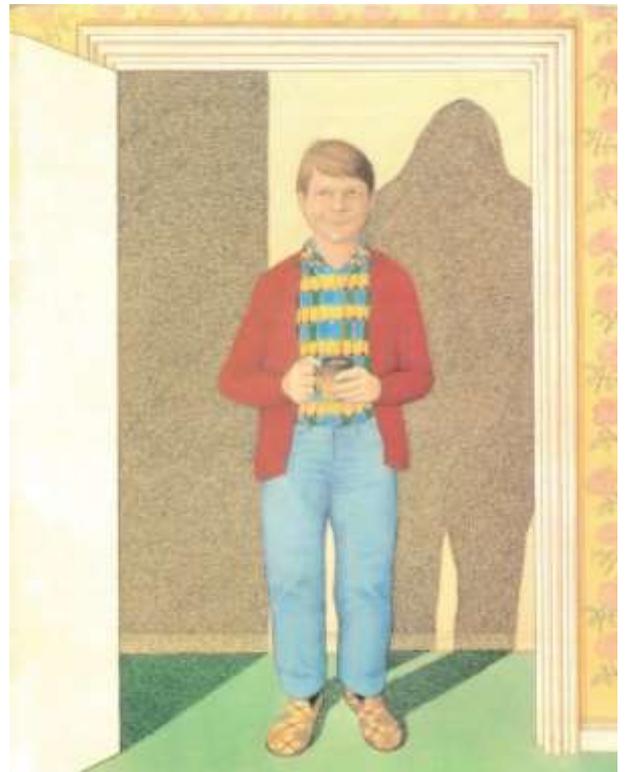
*I'm the world's tallest **giant**  
with eyes like footballs  
and feet like a football pitch.  
When you let me in,  
I'm going to tread on you!*  
Then I **won't** let you in!

*Knock, knock.*

Who's there?

*I'm your big cuddly daddy  
with a mug of hot chocolate  
and a story to tell.  
Please may I come in?*

Come in, come in, come in!  
There's been a gorilla at the  
door,  
and a witch  
and a ghost  
and a dragon  
and a giant  
and ...  
I knew it was you ... really.



One of the big questions we, and all of humankind, must face is that of “Who is God, really?” or “Who is Jesus, really?”

This question was at the centre of the dialogue in John 10. We, familiar with Psalm 23, familiar with hymns such as “The king of love my shepherd is” and “Faithful shepherd feed me”, probably don’t feel surprise when we read in John 10 of Jesus taking the shepherd metaphor for himself. But it caused quite a stir for those who first heard it. The part of John 10 that we heard this morning comes after the parts of the shepherd discourse most familiar to us. The context of the whole chapter is a debate between Jesus and some Pharisees over his healing of the man born blind. Jesus starts this discourse warning against all kinds of false leaders (“wolves in sheep’s clothing” we could say):

I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. [John 10:1-3]

Jesus is not understood, so he tries again, taking a slightly different tack:

I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. [10:7-9]

In saying that he is the gate for the sheep, Jesus seems to be saying much the same thing as “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.” [John 14:6] Jesus is the door, the way, to life in the kingdom of God – unlike the false shepherds.

Now this at least was guaranteed to upset the Pharisees, but then Jesus throws petrol on the fire as he says, “I am the good shepherd.” [10:14] This would have been understood to at the very least indicate that he thought of himself as the Messiah, God’s instrument of salvation. The shepherd imagery was well known as a picture of leadership and salvation for humanity. In Ezekiel 34 it is *God* who takes upon himself the role of shepherd of the flock, taking over the role from the faithless shepherds of Israel. In the remainder of John 10, Jesus tells of how the saving activity of God is going to take place through his representative, Jesus. In the

Father's name he cares for the sheep of Israel's flock, gathers the Gentiles too, and lays down his life and is raised up again to deliver all humankind so that all may become one flock under one shepherd.

By the time we come to today's passage, the context and the audience have shifted, but the stream of thought continues. It is now the Feast of Dedication, Hanukkah, also known as the Festival of Lights. The festival commemorates a key event in the life of the Jewish people. In 175 BC, a Greek king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, invaded Judea. He looted the Temple in Jerusalem, and ordered a halt to services and sacrifices there. A few years later, in 167, Antiochus ordered that an altar to the Greek god Zeus be erected in the Temple. This act of idolatry was the final straw, and it led to a revolt led by the priestly family of Mattathias. Their success led to one of the sons of Mattathias, Judas, who became known as Maccabaeus, becoming king and founding a royal dynasty which was to last a hundred years until the Romans made Herod the Great king instead.

Hanukkah therefore prompted thoughts, not only of God and liberation, not only of freedom to use the Temple, but also about kings. And in this context, Jesus walking about the Temple, talking about being the good shepherd, the real shepherd, was bound to be controversial and dangerous.

Some are eager for Jesus to make his royal intentions absolutely explicit: they would prefer to be without the rule of Rome. But many are hostile: they misunderstand what his kingly reign might mean; or they see that their own positions of relative privilege might be called into question by one who comes to exercise a reign of justice and righteousness. If we were to read on beyond today's portion of John 10 we would find that they pick up stones ready to maim or kill him.

So coloured are our minds by our familiarity with Psalm 23, with its declaration of God's abundant provision and care, that we can slip into turning the image of good shepherd into a kind of commoditisation of what God offers us, a kind of cupboard love, where we focus on what we get.

But the passage we heard from John 10, and the violent reaction to Jesus' declaration that the sheep listen to his voice – that implicit claim to being Lord of all –

should stop us in our tracks against that kind of cupboard love. This shepherd is the world's true king and ruler of all.

“The Lord is my shepherd” expresses a relationship – only a sheep can say “so-and-so is my shepherd”. To place ourselves under God's shepherding is to place ourselves under God's authority.

Yes, it is also to place ourselves in the care of the one who loves us, cares for us, protects and guides us, the one who saves us and can assure us that at the end we will dwell with him for ever.

But we need to get the order right: this shepherd is our *Lord*, first and foremost, and that is of the essence of the good news.

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Knowing who Jesus is really, is of the essence of the assurance of Revelation. The fledgling church communities to which John the Divine was writing are about to face a nightmare of persecution. With the growing practice of emperor worship, increasing numbers of people were required to make a public act of dedication and worship of Caesar on pain of punishment or death. For Christians this meant making a fateful choice of allegiance. What John therefore provides this vulnerable Christian community in this vision is the understanding that there is an ultimate reality that is far, far greater than the sham represented in emperor worship; a fundamental reality that represents the ultimate solution to the nightmarish conditions. It is as if John is assuring the frightened children that daddy is really there with his comforting mug of hot chocolate and a story to tell that will chase the nightmares away. And the reality that John's vision presents is that the creator God and the lamb have already won the victory, the victory that means that those who follow the lamb are rescued from harm. The reality is that the people who claim the lamb's protection may well have to come through a time of great suffering, but they will then find themselves in the true reality, in God's throne room, worshipping him and serving him day and night with great, abundant and exuberant joy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, *Revelation*, pp.73-74.

As I said last week, Jesus is the lion-lamb: the all-powerful king who exercises his power in self-giving sacrificial love. Knowing that this is who Jesus is, is vitally important to the assurance that John's vision gives. It is only through the lion-lamb that the victory has been won; it is only through the lion-lamb therefore that we can be rescued.

In this piece from Revelation 7, the lion-lamb metaphor gets another dimension: "The lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd." [v.17] Here we are back again with John 10 and the good shepherd. Here again is Jesus in his messianic role, the role of king taking care of his people. And, of course, sitting behind that too we have the Psalm 23 image of God as the shepherd who leads his people to springs of living water.<sup>3</sup>

It was important for those present at the Feast of Dedication to know who was really there in the person of Jesus. It was important for the persecuted churches to whom John the Divine wrote to know who was really there, victorious and reigning, suffering and caring with and for them.

I think it is just as important for us in our own time to know who is really there. We too need the kind of assurance that the persecuted church needed. We too need to know that it is the lion-lamb who is the world's true ruler and to give him our whole-hearted loyalty and trust.

"...there are many voices that tell us how to grow closer to God: by having a prescribed religious experience, by believing the correct doctrine, by reaching a higher level of knowledge or a higher level of morality.

"By contrast, the Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on belonging to him. Never does our status before God depend on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt, or on what we accomplish. It depends on one thing only: that we are known by the shepherd....

"The voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that liberates rather than oppresses. It does not say, "Do this, and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, *Revelation*, pp.75-76

sheep.” It says, “You belong to me already. No one can snatch you out of my hand.” Secure in this belonging, we are free to live the abundant life of which Jesus spoke earlier in the chapter: ‘I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.’ (John 10:10) ...

“Amidst all the other voices that evoke fear, make demands, or give advice, the voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice of promise – a voice that calls us by name and claims us as God’s own.”<sup>4</sup>

The world in our day needs to understand – and to see in and through us – the lion-lamb reality in all its fullness. The world needs to understand that our heavenly “daddy” who comes to comfort us with hot chocolate and a story is wholly good and has our best interests at heart; and the world needs to understand that therefore our heavenly daddy will act against what is corrupt and broken and wrong in the world and in us. Or to put it another way, the world needs to come to appreciate the lion, the shepherd, the ruler. It is all too tempting to domesticate God, to make God merely comfortable for us, serving us ... which leads down a slippery slope to irrelevance because a merely comfortable god can’t solve our or the world’s problems.

And at the same time, the world – and sometimes we Christians too – need to recognise that this lion, this shepherd, is also the lamb. As the vision in Revelation 7 has it, this is the one who will lead us to springs of living water where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Often we find that those who have rejected God have actually rejected a false nightmarish projection of a faceless heavenly bureaucrat keeping moral accounts or a violent celestial bully beating up those he doesn’t approve of.<sup>5</sup> The reality of God, revealed in Jesus the lion-lamb, the good shepherd, is our merciful, rescuing “daddy”, the one who loves his children way, way beyond their deserving and imagining.

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson, “Commentary”

<sup>5</sup> “Faceless heavenly bureaucrat” and “violent celestial bully” are from Wright, *Revelation*, p.76

## Sources:

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