

Tabitha or in Greek, Dorcas, is the patron saint of knitters and quilters, tailors, altar guilds and textile artists. So when she died, they laid out all her fabrics, quilts, linens, and clothes. It was a memorial. She was a bit of an icon in her community of a good shepherd.

Like any trade or profession, there is the good and the bad. Usually the “good” ones are the ones you can trust. A good dentist or a good car mechanic, or a good lawyer, nurse or contractor are people you can trust. They are people you feel secure with as they help you navigate something or they provide a service for you that you cannot do for yourself.

So it is with shepherds. There are some good ones, and there are some bad ones. Apparently, the good ones know their sheep and their sheep know the voice of the shepherd. There is a sense of familiarity, safety, and security. They respond to one another.

Furthermore, the good ones are so *committed* to their sheep that they are prepared to lay down their lives for the sheep - they will give everything. It seems like a wonderful sentiment,

but if that should happen, then what becomes of the sheep? Who looks after them? Who protects them? This whole business of being willing to lay down their life for the sheep becomes a bit of liability.

I never understood this until I had the opportunity to visit a shepherd’s cave outside of Bethlehem. There I learned that the shepherd would gather the sheep inside a sheepfold, which was typically a cave, each night. To “watch over them” the shepherd would also become the gate to the sheepfold, or the cave, by laying down across the entrance to the cave. So for a sheep to exit the sheepfold, it would have to go “over” the shepherd. And for a predator to enter the sheepfold, it would have to go “over” or devour the shepherd. Any good shepherd, by lying down across the entrance to the cave, would never allow either of these two things to happen without some intervention.

“I am the good shepherd”, Jesus says, who is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. By so doing Jesus indicates that he is prepared to be devoured by the enemy or the predator in order to protect the sheep inside the cave. It is also a way for Jesus to identify himself as the “gate”. “I am the gate” and the “gatekeeper” he will say.

If anyone wants to enter this cave, or this sheepfold, they have to go “through me.”

As the gospel narrative continues we know that Jesus gives himself to the enemy. He willingly submits to the event of death, in order to be devoured by it, but ultimately not left there. He is not left beaten up, swallowed up, and consumed by it. In fact, because this shepherd is so *exceptionally* good, that is, he is made of other stuff - uniquely “divine” stuff - he has the ability to *destroy* the predator. This enemy will no longer have dominion over us. Yes, of course, as part of creation our bodies still weaken and eventually still die, that’s just the natural course of things; but it is no longer that last and final word.

The last and final word belongs to the Word that was also from the beginning. It is the Word of life that was begotten not made, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, the Word that was revealed to us, the Word that existed before time, and the Word that became the Light of the world, the gate to the sheepfold, the good Shepherd. It is this eternal Word only that has the power to dissolve any predator and thereby deliver us from its threatening clutches.



This is a Word worth listening to. It is what makes this shepherd exceptionally good. And being in the sheepfold, or cave, of this “good” shepherd means that you are protected, delivered and freed from all threatens to devour you. It is secure. It is safe. This is a shepherd who knows us, and as we spend more time with this shepherd you begin to recognize his voice and know where he leadeth - to green pastures, still waters, and through valleys of the shadow of death, to banquet tables where your head is anointed before enemies, where your cup overfloweth; and ultimately where you you abide in the house of the Lord forever. This is a good shepherd that you can trust.

So, it is no surprise that we hear the story of Dorcas, the patron saint of altar guilds, knitters and quilters, and textile artists on this day. Dorcas with all her fabrics had died. Like Lazarus, Dorcas was brought back from the dead as a sign of the power of the One who dissolves the sting of death: the good shepherd, Jesus Christ the Lord. To him belong all majesty, power and dominion from this day and forevermore. Amen.