

"Surrounded by God"

Hearing about the sheepfold this week makes me think of the fence in our backyard. It's one of those tall wooden fences that you can find in six-by-eight foot sections at Lowe's or Home Depot. More than a year ago part of the fence had to be taken down by a tree company so they could drive their truck into our backyard and take down an enormous dead tree. In taking down a section of fence, the supporting post that it was nailed to snapped from its base, where the wood had rotted nearly to mulch in the ground. The repair project daunted me, and then we had a baby, and so that six-by-eight section of fence lay there on the ground for more than a year.

If you'd asked me a few years ago what I thought about fences, I would have shrugged. A fence wasn't anywhere on the list of things I cared about when my wife and I were home shopping. It's a nice fence, but I would have traded it for a fireplace in a heartbeat. But I grew to appreciate the fence, and there was something deeply unsettling about its appearance with a large piece missing. It was no longer a fence in any functional sense, merely a very long wall.

I was a long time in realizing that the image of the fence had given me some sense of comfort and security—not from literal thieves and bandits—but from the more elusive enemies of the soul. Of course, I don't think that a wooden fence offers any real protection against fear or worry, pride or self-will. But perhaps it does remind me in some subtle way of God's desire to protect and shield me. Architecture as symbol of God's protection is everywhere in the psalms. Psalm 48, for example, "Make the circuit of Zion; walk round about her; count the number of her towers. Consider well her bulwarks. Examine her strongholds."

Our love of fences and bulwarks may owe in some part to fear—of the world, of other people—but I think there's a more elemental impulse behind it. I remember how as a child, I could entertain myself endlessly with a few pieces of furniture and some blankets and pillows. My love of fort-building had little to do with fear and a lot to do with feeling embraced and held, a sense of being chosen and special, an intuition perhaps of the Good Shepherd calling me by name and leading me into the sheepfold.

On Monday morning, after a year of looking at the broken fence, I finally called a friend to ask for help rebuilding it. He dropped whatever he was doing and a couple hours later the fence was restored. I love a good project, and especially the sense of satisfaction that comes from completing it and surveying my handiwork, but this felt different somehow. It wasn't just pride I felt, but the feeling that something had been set right.

This may seem like a strong reaction to repairing a fence, but I believe that spiritual truth is revealed in the everyday work and activity of our material lives. And my simple fence, like the sheepfold or the towers of Zion, is a reminder of God's powerful love, surrounding me on all sides—and how that love is expressed through a friend, willing to drop what he's doing and lend a hand.