

In the great cosmic paddock that is John 10, Jesus is the gate through which we enter the Christian faith. If you want to be Christian, you gotta go through him. Great. But there's another line: beware the thieves and bandits. Jesus says his sheep won't follow them. But as we're seeing, if you insist that you're the gate convincingly enough, you can lead a lot of people astray. (This is why it's "know them by their fruits," not "believe whatever they say.") On a completely unrelated note, the President's spiritual director will assign an angel to protect you for the low, low price of \$1,000; buy now and she'll throw in a crystal cross that releases supernatural blessings into your home! And people believe. Thieves and bandits, right? Also, she said anyone who opposes the President is demonic and saying no to him "would be saying no to God."

Here's some fruits of not saying no. 2025 had the highest number of deaths in ICE detention since their inception, and this year's progressing at a faster pace. People -- not livestock -- people are herded into camps under the Christo-fascist drive toward purity. Detainees in two detention centers started hunger strikes last week, and a surprise congressional visit to Alligator Alcatraz confirmed the horrors within. Detainees sense the shadow of death through living conditions, violence, lack of due process, insufficient health care, inedible food, undrinkable water, no access to phones to contact family or legal representation. Over 1,000 former detainees are missing. ICE holds 40,000 people without criminal records and violated 100 court orders in one state in January alone. One detainee said, "The majority of us meet all the requirements to be released ... we need to get out of here and to be treated like human beings." Peter says it is a credit to endure pain when suffering unjustly. The great irony is that with every landed fist or maggoty slice of bread, detainees model righteousness while their captors claim to be the truly righteous. Real Christian behavior held up against false prophets should be clear.

It's getting increasingly easy to tell what's gonna happen next if you take the administration's promises and look at the outcomes. There's an old, mostly reliable saying: the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Well, here's some of that past behavior. "No new wars" really means several new wars. "The cost of living will go down" really means everything's more expensive. "We're only going after criminals" means children in cells. "Advocating for free speech" means reporters' homes being raided. "Law and order" means killing citizens in the street while raking in billions in schemes. So what should we think when they evoke the name of God?

Lately, the Secretary of the Department of War's been promoting "Biblical masculinity." Jesus was a wimp, he argues, and Western Civilization needs to return to Biblical gender roles. Y'all, I'm a priest. I've got no idea what that means. I know what he means, but I don't know what Biblical gender roles mean other than embracing another avenue to manipulate people of faith. The kind of fella he's talking about is like the Marlboro Man or Easy Rider, the personification of a devil-may-care kind of freedom. Apparently, there's nothing more masculine than that kind of unabashed expression of freedom while not caring what people think. Those guys could sidle into town bowlegged, unshaven, unshowered, smelling of the desert or cattle or armpit, and all that's manly. But if any of them so much as wink at a twink, they'd forfeit their manly street cred. Which is weird. It's a masculinity as fragile as the kind of whiteness that was so easily tainted by drinking out of non-segregated water fountains during Jim Crow. It's vapid, tenuous, performative, and dangerous. And that sort of masculinity's at odds with a very different kind: the kind that seeks the strength to be kind, forgiving, and calm - a mastery of self rather than a raging temper and a hole in the drywall.

You want to talk about Biblical masculinity? Start with grace, truth, mercy, and self-sacrificing care prioritizing the weak and excluded. Biblical masculinity entails making dinner, weeping publicly, washing other

men's feet, staying your hand, turning the other cheek, reading, studying, standing up to injustice. It means being clever enough not to get hoodwinked, going out of your way to help even when the person in need of help isn't one of your people, even when it's a foreigner, even when it's an enemy. Biblical masculinity means patience; it means sacrifice; it means emotional self-regulation. It means caring for a garden, being kind to animals, considering lilies. It's living by the just guardrails set by society and tearing down the unjust ones. It means honesty in business, extravagant compensation for workers, recognizing the concept of enough and the dangers of failing to. It means sharing. It means giving. It means nurturing. It means opening your home to anyone who needs the hospitality. It means changing your name. It means napping on fishing boats, not sinking them. For what it's worth, Biblical womanhood entails crafting military strategy, ruling a nation, being appointed by God, attaining independence through economic success, leading churches, guiding the fate of a people, telling the truth whether you're the one in power or someone else is. It means being politically savvy with power and brilliance and protection.

While we're on "traditional" Biblical gender roles, you'd think if Biblical masculinity were really the goal, we'd hear a lot more about trans men from that crowd. But almost no one talks about them. The debate's centered on how trans women are supposedly a threat to womanhood. (In reality, I fear we leave out trans men in part because they could be seen as an extension of women's freedom.) But the real worries in the trans debate aren't women's protection or saving the children. If they were, we'd also see the prioritization of nutrition, schooling, childcare, equal pay, just sentencing for sexual abusers, increased funding for WIC, an emphasis on maternal healthcare, and the full release of the Epstein Files, to name a few. But the Secretary's Biblical masculinity doesn't care about any of that. It's a fragile and performative masculinity based on little more than fantasies of burly men held up as the narrow, subservient, id-heeding, and easily herded ubermensch.

Take the restroom debate. The primary argument is that having people who were assigned male at birth in a women's restroom puts women in danger. While trans women say they want to use the bathroom that accommodates what they need, men claim to know what they want better than they do, an experience I'm sure isn't limited to trans women. Those "Biblically masculine" men can imagine no reason anyone would want to go into the women's restroom except to gain access to women in a vulnerable space. They can't imagine going in there for any reason other than sexual violence because, given the opportunity, that's what they would do. And it doesn't stop at the bathroom door. New legislation seeks to further restrict trans people's presence in public spaces with the ultimate goal of removing them from society altogether.

There's fear behind all this, a threat trans people represent to the hypermasculine facade. So-called "real" men are afraid. And part of what they're afraid of is 1) trans men being seen as more masculine than them and 2) it coming out that they might find trans women attractive. 'No way a "woman" can be more manly than me, and God forbid a trans woman "fool" a real manly man with their convincing disguise.' Both threaten to dethrone even the manliest of men. This fear is so common it has a name -- "gender panic" -- and it's a legal defense that makes room for abhorrent violence. And it works because other "manly" men understand, to paraphrase, that there are few things more threatening to insecure masculinity than being queer because being queer is feminine, and there is nothing worse than being like a woman. It's not great to respond with violence or anger or misogyny, but hey, at least those preserve their masculinity. Anti-trans arguments reveal not the threat of trans people but the threat of a man whose masculinity is in question. He would rather strip people of their freedoms, see them hanged on a fencepost, and erase them from existence than let anyone perceive his weakness. And don't you dare question him, be he Secretary or Savior or President, because to question him would be to question God.

Thieves and bandits abound, y'all. Sometimes they wear flags on their lapels and crosses around their necks. Sometimes they claim to represent Christ, quote nonexistent scriptures, threaten to destroy civilizations

in the name of a God they don't know. Sometimes they sell salvation, and sometimes we give 'em the benefit of the doubt for too long. But they can't hide their true selves forever. The less we hold them to account, the more they push how far they can go and reveal what bandits they really are -- bandits that would much rather fleece the sheepfold than protect it.

And this is where we come in. We can't keep thieves and bandits from existing. But we can protect the flock when they arrive, and they have arrived. It's astonishing how hard it is to advocate for the guy on the cross over the one disguised in sheepskin, picking his teeth with a dagger, and chopping up vegetables for mutton stew. We've gotta help the more easily taken in to see what's in front of them. It's not always as clear as angels for hire, but that's something we can overcome. We can, and we will, because we must. Whether it's Biblically dubious gender roles, idolatry, existential threats to immigrants, the abuse of women, or the targeting of sexual and gender minorities, though the shadow of death seems overwhelming, there's hope yet. Hope for green pastures, hope for overflowing cups, for safe places to rest, plenty to eat, goodness and mercy everywhere we walk. There's hope for Biblical humanity to get our act together, to love one another, to protect those who need protecting and foster the traits of true Christian siblings. There's hope for all that, but it starts with knowing the gate, knowing the bandit, and knowing which to follow.