



John La Farge, *Good Shepherd* (detail)

## The Slumbering Shepherd: A Case of Mistaken Identity

By Dennis Raverty

**T**he *Good Shepherd* window designed by John La Farge, and installed at the Episcopal Church of the Ascension in New York City in 1910, is among the artist's last and most magnificent works in stained glass (he died that same year). Together with his colleague and bitter rival, Louis Comfort Tiffany, La Farge pioneered not one but several groundbreaking new methods for opalescent glass production in the late 19th century. It is difficult to overestimate their enormous contributions to the methods of manufacturing glass — they revolutionized the field.

The principal figure in the composition of the window is a beardless youth still in his late adolescence, carrying what appears to be a shepherd's staff, and surrounded by grazing sheep in a lush meadow landscape. But surprisingly, and unlike most images of the Good Shepherd, the figure gently

cradles in his arms not a lamb but a sleeping human infant. I had never before come across any depiction of the Good Shepherd represented with a baby, and was intrigued by the possible allegorical meaning of the slumbering child.

But then I noticed that the youth's staff was not actually a shepherd's crook but a flowering rod, a traditional symbolic attribute of St. Joseph. Yet he was not depicted as an old man, but as a beardless youth with long, flowing hair who appears to be in his late teens, with just the faintest shadow of a mustache on his upper lip. Moreover, the young man passes to the infant a pomegranate, said to contain 613 seeds, traditionally signifying the 613 commandments of the Torah and the transmission of the Jewish law through Joseph to Jesus.

For an artist so steeped in tradition to have accidentally included these very specific, highly idiosyncratic symbols



seemed impossible. Then I realized that the title of the window might refer not to the youth who dominates the composition but to the little child asleep in his arms. The youth is St. Joseph, not Christ, and Jesus is the sleeping baby. The iconography and cast of characters had been misinterpreted by the parish for decades.

There are other depictions from art history of the Good Shepherd as a child, and in these paintings the Christ child usually has a shepherd's crook and is surrounded by multiple sheep, as in several works by Murillo from the 17th century, with which La Farge would have been familiar.

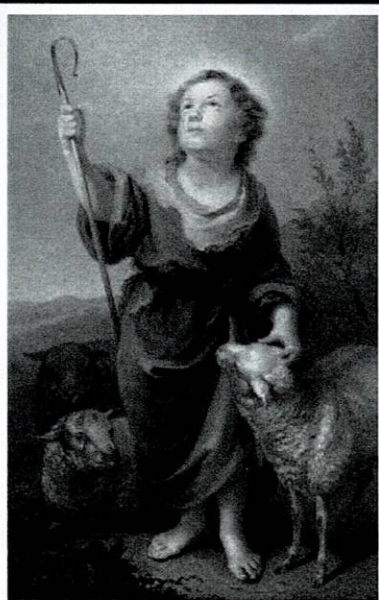
Although showing Christ as a boy shepherd was not uncommon, I am not aware of any other representations of the Good Shepherd as an infant. Here La Farge, an otherwise quite conventional artist, seems to depart from tradition not only in the age of Christ but also in the tender years of his caretaker, St. Joseph.

The idea of Joseph as an old man has its earliest surviving expression in an early Christian writing, the *Proto-Gospel of James* or the *Protoevangelium*, a second-century text ascribed to James, the "brother of the Lord," a character who figures prominently in the Book of Acts and has interchanges with Paul. The Church gets much of its lore about the lives of both Mary and Joseph from this apocryphal source (most scholars agree that *Protoevangelium* was not actually written by James). Although he is mentioned by name in both Matthew and Luke's gospels, the New Testament never discusses Joseph's age.

In the apocryphal book, Mary, while still a girl, is said to have worked in and lived near the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, weaving and embroidering vestments for the Jewish priests. However, as puberty approached, she married an elderly widower with children from his first marriage, whose wooden staff miraculously blossomed as a sign of his future role as foster father to Christ and chaste guardian of the Virgin.

This narrative explains James as the older stepbrother, not the natural brother, of Jesus and supports the claim that Mary was a virgin, not only during the conception and birth of Jesus but ever afterward as well. This version of the narrative is widely accepted by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, as well as many Anglicans, and assumes that the marriage between Mary and Joseph was never consummated.

However, it was common among many Protestants, both in 1910 and today, to believe that while Mary was the Virgin Mother of Christ, after Jesus' birth she had other children with Joseph, including James, making James the younger half-brother and not the older stepbrother of Jesus. St.



Engraving after Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Good Shepherd* (17th c.)

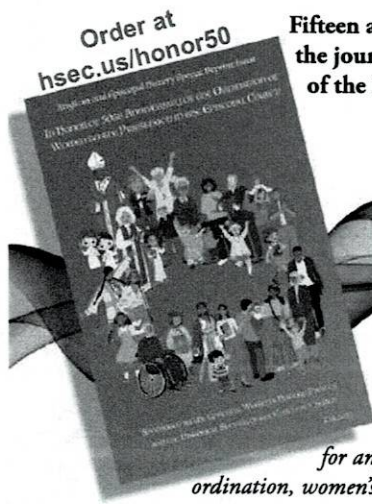
Joseph shown as a young man, as he is in La Farge's window, was more in line with this Protestant view of Joseph, even though the designer was a Roman Catholic throughout his life. But the parish was low church, so such an interpretation would have been acceptable, Ascension's rector, the Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell, tells me.

The motif of the sleeping Christ child recalls the account of the angel appearing to Joseph in dreams, and his namesake from the Book of Genesis, who interpreted dreams. Dreams and sleeping have a special significance for both Josephs. Perhaps the sleeping infant as the Good

Shepherd represents the slumbering Christ within each of us, who needs to be nurtured, cared for, and protected so that grace awakens and unexpectedly blossoms forth miraculously, like Joseph's staff. Like him, we are all caretakers and shepherds entrusted with the guardianship of the divine child slumbering within.

*Dr. Dennis Raverty is a retired associate professor of art history, specializing in art of the 19th and 20th centuries, and gives frequent presentations, both live and online.*

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