

Message - 04/25/21

Ps 23; Ac 4:5-12; 1 Jn 3:16-24; Jn 10:11-18
4th Sunday in Easter – Our Good Shepherd

Folks loved to gather around Jesus to hear His stories and His teaching – and to be near Him. They either were shepherds or saw shepherds every day in the hills outside of town. Jesus painted a portrait of God – that was easy to understand. You and I don't see shepherds as often as those people Jesus was talking to.

A shepherd's primary responsibility is the safety and welfare of the flock. Some flocks could be as large as 1,000 sheep. The shepherd grazes the animals, leading them to areas of good forage, and keeping a watchful eye out for poisonous plants. Shepherds have to camp. As the sheep eat all the forage in an area, the shepherds move both the sheep and their living quarters to fresh range. In most cases, the shepherd and his dogs will move the sheep out to fresh grazing each day and bring them back to bed down in the same area each night. Around the towns of Judah, shepherds made use of natural caves – or they built barriers around the flock to keep out predators. Though we may not think of ourselves as fluffy four-footed ruminants – that is how the Lord sees us. We are the sheep of His pasture. If this offends you, just sit with it a while.

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And so He does. He makes a comparison to a hired hand, who would simply run away from the flock if a wolf or bear attacked to feast on a young, helpless sheep. The Son of God is not like that. So, the Apostle John says, "Abide in the Good Shepherd" – that is, live in Him – stay close to Him – and as His followers, obey His commands. In this way, the Shepherd abides in us – makes His life with us. Jesus does see us as His flock – given to Him by God to watch over and care for.

To protect the sheep under his care, a shepherd may use guard dogs or other guard animals. Predators include coyotes, wolves, mountain lions, bears and domestic dogs, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Both fall and spring, domestic dogs run in packs. They can attack any number of small animals, including lambs, and tear them to pieces. In addition to using guard animals, many shepherders in our time carry rifles to shoot predators that are attacking the sheep. First century shepherds did not have firearms or cell phones or jeeps to make their lives easier. They were on their own and had to use the weapons of the times to protect and defend the flock: slingshots, swords, knives and spears. Imagine Jesus throwing off his cloak and going after an attacking lion or bear with a hunting knife. He lays down His life for His sheep.

Sheep are susceptible to diseases, and they must also be monitored during the lambing process. They may also be bothered by insects, some of which carry disease. Shepherds are responsible for minor injuries or basic medical treatment, especially since they work in isolated areas far from veterinary services in modern times. In addition, shepherds may administer worming medication or vaccines and apply insecticides. During lambing season, the shepherd will make frequent checks on the ewes at all hours of the day and night. They may assist the ewe if birthing problems occur. Imagine the worries and hard work the shepherds had in Jesus' day. Jesus endures all these hardships to watch over His people, just as the shepherd watches over the flock.

Our Good Shepherd watches over us most especially in spiritual matters. He says, "Peace be with you. It is I – do not be afraid." How tough it is for us to trust Him for everything. We tend to believe we must handle the troubles that come our way without calling on our Good Shepherd. This is foolishness. In the spiritual realm we are defenseless until our Good Shepherd steps between us and the forces of destruction and evil. He watches over us.

Unlike other animals that shed their hair in the spring, sheep must be shorn – have their fleece cut off with shears or clippers. This task may be assigned to sheepshearers, whose primary occupation is shearing, or it may be yet another duty of the shepherd. Sheep may be sheared in the open or in holding pens. An experienced shepherd is expected to shear up to 125 animals a day without nicking or cutting their skin, and to remove the fleece intact, according to the Mountain Plains Agricultural Service.

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Just imagine the burrs, briars, brush, parasites and other junk the shearers find in the thick winter fleece of a sheep! We sheep are not the cleanest creatures. Yet, Jesus lovingly cares for our every need – food, water, protection, cleaning, healing and comfort when we are afraid.

Jesus calls us to love and follow Him as He loves us and calls each of us by name. There's more: He calls us to know Him as the Father knows His Son. And He calls us to seek the unity of being His flock. We, unlike sheep, are meant to care for one another. This unique quality of character defines a member of the Shepherd's flock. The flock of Jesus is called to live out the love of God before the world. We can only learn to love by being loved.

Our resemblance to literal sheep ends here. We form our worldview out of the relationship we have with our Savior – the Good Shepherd. I believe Jesus chose the picture of a flock of sheep to represent the people of God because we are not independent individuals – but part of a fellowship under the protection of this Good Shepherd. A lone sheep is easy prey for any carnivore in the forest or field.

The very definition of lostness is a confused and wayward sheep stumbling alone through the field of the world. Poor baby. Only Jesus, leaving the rest of the flock and coming out to find His little lost one can bring it back into the safety of the sheepfold.

If you or I trust in our own means – our might, our cunning, our strength, our luck – to preserve us from predators, we are lost.

Hear Him calling today. Right now. He would lift you up and guide you into His fold – safe and secure from danger to your soul and the anxiety of being lost. Amen.