

“OH, SHEEP!”  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Eunice Koch - May 3, 2009

*Acts 4:5-12*

*Psalm 23*

*1 John 3:16-24*

*John 10:11-18*

“We’re poor little lambs who have lost our way. Baa, baa, baa - Lord have mercy on such as we. Baa, baa, baa.” And we have received mercy. We have been given the Good Shepherd.

The fourth Sunday of Easter – today - is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year in our three year cycle of readings, the Gospel lesson is from a section of John chapter 10. Today the reading centers around the Good Shepherd being willing to lay down his life for his flock.

This image is a part of our culture. On Easter Sunday Capt. Phillips was rescued from pirates near Somalia. The head of the Maritime Academy where Phillips trained described the captain as "the good shepherd who willingly exchanged his life for the lives of his flock,"

We are no longer a rural, agriculturally-based society. Often we equate sheep-herding with images from movies and TV – waves of sheep in the New Zealand hills -- dogs herding the sheep from behind, with the shepherd following - the dogs obeying the shepherds commands from afar. There are even herding competitions for dogs! The closest we come to sheep is wearing wool and eating the sheeps milk cheese!

The images of Jesus as shepherd are often sentimental and “fuzzy-wuzzy.” Most have the shepherd dressed in the clothing of the artists’ “world” - Jesus garbed in clothing that would not last a day out on the hills with sheep!

The most familiar ones have Jesus carrying the lamb or with the lamb draped over his shoulder, based on the “Lost Sheep” parable. - This is an important image. I have a picture like this in my bedroom. This is the gentle Jesus that comforts a child through a night when there are monsters in the closet. This is the Jesus who stays with adults too, through nights of weeping, and loneliness, and worry, and despair. The comfort in this image is why gospel selections telling of Jesus as shepherd and the 23rd Psalm are often used at funerals. Shepherds must be gentle – sheep respond better to a calm voice. Sheep do not get panicky at shearing-time if they have always experienced a gentle touch.

If you want to go into the sheep-raising business today, you face the four main difficulties that shepherds of all ages have faced: disease, predation and finding food and water. A small operation for cheesemaking can raise their herd using fenced pastures. In some areas (such as ours) guard animals are necessary.

Open range flocks are those with large numbers of sheep, cared for by a few full-time shepherds. This requires the shepherds to live with the sheep as they move throughout the range. Today sheepdogs are used for both herding and guarding. Horses & ATVs can be used to let shepherds ride instead of walk. Finding open-range pasturage has been made easier by the use of aircraft. The sheep receive routine vet care.

Today the shepherd often cannot recognize his own sheep. These large herds often have multiple owners so the sheep may be marked with special type of dye. Sort of like branding cattle. Talk about a “Sheep of a different color!”

Yes, open range work is tough, but much MUCH easier than in biblical times. They, and shepherds in undeveloped areas of the world today, still lead the flock from the front. The sheep follow their voice. The sheep know their touch.

Shepherds are and were often dirty and shaggy. Not like the ones in the artworks. They were out “in the fields tending their flock by night” – and day and night – rain and shine – weeks and months at a time. Often the sheep are herded into a gully for safety and the shepherd will lie down in the opening, becoming the gate. There is no glamour in the job.

Psalm 23 covers the full range of the shepherd’s job, in times good and bad. **THEY** provided the health care – **THEY** found the food and water – **THEY** offered protection from predators. **THE SHEPHERD WAS EVERYTHING FOR THE SHEEP AND THE SHEEP TRUSTED HIM!** This whole picture is what we must bring to mind when listening to Jesus telling us He is our shepherd.

The Israelites descended from a long line of shepherds, going all the way back to Abel. And Abraham – Jacob – Joseph – David. David must be the most familiar. When Samuel located David to anoint him king, he was out tending the sheep.

Many of the Psalms attributed to David have shepherding references, not only the 23rd. For instance, Psalm 78 “He led his people out like sheep” refers to God leading the Israelites out of Egypt. And Psalm 100:2 “Know this: the Lord himself is GOD; he himself has made us and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.” These references are to God as the shepherd.

But there are other Old Testament references to the leaders of Israel being shepherds.

**AN ASIDE:** Our weekly readings come from a “lectionary” - a listing that contains a collection of scripture readings appointed for worship on a given day or occasion. It follows a three year cycle. Our current lectionary selections are from the Revised Common Lectionary – readings used by Roman Catholics, Methodists, ELCA Lutherans, US, Presbyterians. Moravians, and many others. More sheep of a different color?

Previously, we used the selections from the Book of Common Prayer. That allowed for a part of Ezekiel to be read on Good Shepherd Sunday in year B, the year we are in now.

It starts “The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them- to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.” OUCH!

Chapter and verse numbering in the Bible can be a mixed blessing. It allows us to navigate a very large book easily. Sometimes this interrupts a story. The chapter division in this section of John is an example.

We miss the drama in the last part of chapter 9. Jesus healed a blind man ON THE SABBATH.. It is late in Jesus’ earthly life. He is answering the Pharisees who are questioning this. It is a confrontational situation; not Jesus teaching his followers on a pleasant hillside but the Jewish authorities challenging Him.

The Pharisees certainly knew of the Old Testament references to God as shepherd. They knew of Ezekiel’s depiction of the leaders of Israel as “bad” shepherds. Did they think that Jesus, by claiming to be the Good Shepherd was claiming to be God”? Did they think that by claiming to be a Good Shepherd, he was accusing them of being bad shepherds? Did their reactions lead to violence?

Verse 33 of chapter 10, not included in our readings but a continuation of the event, says “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God”.

What about the on-lookers to the scene? Or the early Christian readers of the book of John? Images of pastures with shepherds were relevant to them. For many, shepherding was a family tradition, the way to keep their families fed and clothed. Certainly, they understood the analogies. Did they get the message?

And what about us? Are we shepherds? Jesus said “feed me sheep”? I don’t think we are very good shepherds. There are too many people around us, and around the world, without adequate shelter, who are not being fed, physically or spiritually

Are we sheep? Let’s face it - sheep are not the brightest of animals. But they do listen for the voice of the shepherd and they follow. Are we listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd? Listening intently? Do we get the message?

Remember, Jesus was both – the Good Shepherd AND the Lamb of God. We probably should be both sheep and shepherds, too – listening for WHERE we are to go and WHAT we are to do – then FOLLOWING.

AMEN