

Title: Baah, Baah

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, all we like sheep have gone astray, but even then, our shepherd leads us to green pastures; help us pay attention and listen to our shepherd, Christ Jesus, who will never lead us astray and through whom we pray. Amen.

Today the obvious theme is shepherds. The Fourth Sunday of Easter is often called Good Shepherd Sunday. The main reason for this is that shepherds were and are quite common in the Holy Land. For Semitic peoples, sheep and goats are the easiest livestock to keep. Pigs can't be eaten and cattle are way too expensive. That leaves sheep and goats. They can survive in a place where pasture land is scarce.

Because of this, any person or persons who were involved with livestock were shepherds. As such, we read about shepherds throughout the Bible. Abraham and his descendants were shepherds. Though not owning livestock, Moses was a shepherd for Jethro and was a shepherd of people, who were about as easy to keep together as sheep. David was a shepherd before he was king. Among other things, the prophet Amos was a shepherd. Isaiah says that the messiah will be a shepherd for the people. The birth of Jesus was announced, first, to shepherds.

To see the biblical view and especially with Jesus' shepherd metaphors, we might get the impression that being a shepherd in biblical times was a noble profession. But no, it was and is not. Shepherds were pariahs. To be frank, shepherds stink. They are with the sheep for days, if not weeks, on end. And they pick up the pungent oils that sheep exude.

When Israel settled in Egypt at Joseph's and the pharaoh's request, they were given the land of Goshen. We might get the impression that this was a great gift, but it was not. Egyptians loathed shepherds and sheep. Since Goshen was not a suitable place for Egyptians to live, well, it must be good enough for Joseph's kin.

One of my co-workers at American Express was Bill McMullen. Bill attended Utah State on a golf scholarship. During his time there, he made

friends with two brothers who were from a sheep ranching family. The brothers were agriculture majors at an aggie school. They were to learn all they could to bring back better ideas for sheep ranching.

A few years after they all graduated, Bill decided to look them up. He went out to their ranch and was told that they were with the sheep. Bill found them in a mobile sheep shack where they had been for the past several weeks. Bill was not pleased with the smell. Bill was also astonished that this is how they live. Bill could not fathom anyone having that kind of a job. The basics of shepherding have not changed for thousands of years, whether you have a college degree or not.

Shepherds in the Holy Land today are mainly Bedouins. Bedouins live in trailers that move with the sheep. Israel has tried to get the Bedouins to live in settlements with mixed results. There is a highway from Jericho to Jerusalem that seemingly goes up and up and up. Along the way, I was struck by the Bedouin camps and nearly all of the trailers had TV dishes on them. I don't know how they get electricity.

In the old city of Jerusalem, my first guides told us of the famous Elias photo studio. A group of us stopped by. It is run by the famous photographer's son. There are many marvelous prints of the Holy Land before Israel became a state. Photos of Jerusalem are of a much smaller city. He also took photos of shepherds, capturing the loneliness of the profession. (Show photo.)

As with any profession, there must be good shepherds and bad shepherds. After all, how would we know what a good shepherd looks like if there were not bad shepherds? Every year for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Jesus' discourse on the Good Shepherd, in John, is divided into three parts, one for each year of the lectionary. This year is part two.

Jesus is the good shepherd. Jesus then continues describing the characteristics of the good shepherd. The first is that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I'm not sure, but I really doubt that Bill McMullen's friends will lay down their lives for any sheep. After all, they are sheep! Who would die for a sheep?

Obviously, one of their jobs is to protect the sheep, especially from predators. If a shepherd was to sacrifice their life for the sheep, who would take care of the sheep then? It doesn't make sense. I would imagine the disciples would have similar thoughts.

So, Jesus explains the concept of a shepherd who dies for sheep. There is a difference between a person hired to take care of the sheep and an owner of the sheep. The hired shepherd has little stake in the welfare of the sheep, except as a means for employment. If a wolf comes along, the hired hand runs away. There were no guns in Jesus' time. The hired hand rightfully believes that the wolf would win any confrontation. Besides, wolves are rarely alone. They hunt in packs.

The wolf or wolves will grab what they can and the rest of the sheep will scatter, except sheep tend not to scatter far. It seems that sheep size up the situation and rightfully conclude that if the wolf doesn't grab me then I am fine to go on doing what I was doing. I am not sure if a sheep mourns the loss of a friend or if it rejoices that it wasn't the victim.

When we were in New Zealand last fall, we saw a sheep shearing. The sheep objected to being singled out. But after it was on the ground, it just laid there – like a sheep. The shearer moved the sheep around for the most efficient cut of the wool, but the sheep just laid there.

Jesus again affirms that he is the good shepherd. The good shepherd knows the sheep and the sheep know the shepherd. A shepherd spends so much time with the sheep that the shepherd can identify each sheep. Granted, flocks in the Holy land are much, much smaller than the herds found in this country, or even in New Zealand. It would be much easier to know each individual sheep in the Holy Land. This intimacy allows the shepherd to better manage the sheep, because the shepherd can predict an individual sheep's behavior.

Ancient and modern shepherds in the Middle East train the animals in their flocks to respond to specific whistles and sounds. These animals knew their own shepherd's voice and responded to his call. There is a depth of intimacy between the sheep and the shepherd. The animals will only respond to their shepherd. Jesus knows that the sheep of his flock know his voice and will follow him where he will lead.

Jesus extends the metaphor of the shepherd and sheep to the relationship Jesus has with God. God and Jesus know each other intimately. Jesus uses this metaphor to explain the relationship Jesus has with God. Jesus teases a relationship with God here and elsewhere implying that Jesus knows the mind of God and vice-versa. Since Jesus is God, there seems to be a connection that Jesus was not able to explain with words. For all intents and purposes, Jesus was God on earth.

Jesus began this section of this gospel by saying the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Now Jesus says “I lay down my life for the sheep.” (John 10:15b) There are many biblical metaphors for Israel in the Bible. Sheep is one of those. As Jesus talked about sheep, the disciples, likely, knew Jesus was referring to Israel. Jesus declares that he has sheep that are not part of this fold. There are sheep that are not Israel. John affirms several times that Jesus died for the whole world and not just Jews.

Jesus says that the non-Jew sheep will listen to Jesus’ voice and follow him. Of course, at this time in the gospel, Jesus’ time is short. His crucifixion is at hand. How will non-Jews hear Jesus’ voice? He doesn’t explain how that will happen and the disciples likely don’t know that he will soon be crucified. They do not know that they were selected to be Jesus’ voice after Jesus’ voice is silenced.

The flock will be bigger than Israel. The world will be one flock and there will be one shepherd. Governors come and go. Presidents come and go. But we have only one shepherd for now and for all time. Our job as part of the flock is to listen to Jesus’ voice and order our lives accordingly.

Jesus’ crucifixion, as horrible as it was, was an act of love. Some people ask, “How can God approve of Jesus’ crucifixion?” Jesus took upon himself the sins of the world and to have them die with him. The nature of his death was entirely up to the Romans. They decided that Jesus would be crucified. If Jesus were not crucified, we would need to think of something else to hang around our necks.

Jesus affirms that he will willingly die. Jesus also said that he will give up his life in order to “take it up again.” Jesus knows his story does not end

with the cross. In fact, Jesus takes responsibility for his death. No one has the power to kill Jesus unless Jesus gives it to them.

Jesus is a passionate shepherd who is willing to risk his own life to protect the life of his sheep. Jesus has every confidence that his death is temporary, because God has told him that Jesus has the power to rise from the dead. Our shepherd lives forever. As his sheep, we will listen to his voice and follow him, forever. Death has no dominion over us.

When we recognize the voice of the shepherd, we respond in love. Just as the shepherd loves us, we follow the shepherd out of love. The shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, so that the sheep may have life and have life abundantly and everlastingly.

Text: **John 10:11–18** (NRSV)

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes^a it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”¹

^a Other ancient authorities read *has taken*#

¹ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version](#). (1989). (Jn 10:11–18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.