

# Sheep and Shepherds

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**Acts 20:17-35; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30**

*Sheep. Lambs. The Shepherd. The flock.* Some key words in the lessons appointed for today, the fourth Sunday of Easter.

Some of you may be old enough to remember how Kirkland was once an important railroad town. The Milwaukee Road had a yard here numbering five or six tracks. There was a coaling facility, and coal from the railroad's mines in southern Indiana came up the branch line through Aurora and DeKalb to Kirkland to supply fuel for the steam locomotives. There was a depot here and, according to a 1949 timetable I have, Kirkland was a flag stop for two passenger trains each way. Besides these, the famous *Hiawatha* train sped through Kirkland and gave its name to our local school district.

But, as longtime residents will recall, Kirkland had another railroad feature that was unusual. West of town, where the branch line split off toward DeKalb, were the sheep pens. The Milwaukee Road hauled livestock from agricultural areas further west, destined for Chicago with its famous stockyards. Regulations mandated that at various points along the line the animals had to be unloaded and given food and water before continuing to their destination. And Kirkland was one of those places, strategically located as the last stop for those wooly flocks before they reached the end of their ill-fated journey.

As much as those sheep pens seemed to proclaim how greatly the railroad, the government, and the livestock brokers cared for those sheep, we all realize the apparent solicitous care was deceptive. The ultimate end of those sheep was not to graze and be watered in a placid green pasture, but another more ominous end. These sheep were, literally, lambs led to the slaughter.

What a contrast, then, to read in the 23rd Psalm how the Lord cares for *his* flock, “the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” as Psalm 95:7 puts it. Several writers have commented on Psalm 23 to explain in detail how it reflects the actual conditions of shepherding in ancient Israel. Naturally the Lord, like any true shepherd, wants to create a safe environment for his flock, taking them to a pasture where the grass is green and not dry and shriveled up, and leading them to still, calm waters where they aren't spooked when trying to drink from some swiftly flowing, rocky stream.

The Lord wants to direct us not to a twisted, winding path but to a straight path we can clearly follow — for that is what righteousness or *tzedek* means in the Bible, straightness or correctness. *vanecheni bema'gelei-tzedek lema'an shemo*, “for his name's sake,” so that the Lord's name or reputation as a caring God will be respected; indeed, the Lord has a stake in our well-being, because if we look good he looks good! His desire is to “restore our soul,” *nafshi-yeshovav*, to bring our life back to what it's supposed to be in his plan for us.

And then the Lord, our shepherd, sticks with us even if we have to go through dark and threatening times, like sheep being led through deep and rocky valleys where the sun may not be illuminating the way. There is danger out there — enemies whose aim is to confuse and confound and even devour us, like the lion and the bear that David boasted to Saul about slaying when they attacked his flock (1 Samuel 17:34-36). The Lord will protect us from these enemies, especially those who lie to us about what Christians should accept as valid and good (which I assume is part of why this church left its former denomination). They are the false prophets whom Jesus called “ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15), the “fierce wolves” Paul warned the elders of Ephesus about who would be “speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples” (Acts 20:30). But we don't need to be afraid; the command to “fear not” is one of Scripture's most frequent admonitions. Our Shepherd has the weapons, the “rod and staff,” to fend off these enemies through the truth of his Word.

Moreover, the Lord even shows us honor in the face of our enemies, preparing a feast of prosperous living of which those who don't know the Lord can only be envious. Living according to the righteous precepts of Scripture doesn't guarantee our prosperity, but it certainly “stacks the deck” in favor of a successful and rewarding life so that we become “the head and not the tail,” as Deuteronomy 28:13 puts it. The Book of Proverbs, which is full of practical wisdom about how we conduct ourselves, puts it this way: “The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life” (Proverbs 22:4).

And just as the shepherd pours the healing oil over the sheep to deal with any cuts or bruises, or perhaps to discourage pestiferous insects, so the Lord pours his Holy Spirit upon his flock to empower them to overcome evil. Anointing with oil, in Scripture, is also a sign of being commissioned for leadership and special destiny; to be anointed, *mashiach*, is to be Messiah or Christ. Martin Luther famously said that every Christian is a “messiah” to the people he meets: “I will . . . give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me.”

So for those who belong to the flock of Christ — as you and I do — there is the promise of the same kind of blessed future that the sheep in ancient Israel would enjoy under the watchful eye of the faithful and competent shepherd. It is not the hopeless future that lay in store for the animals herded into Kirkland’s sheep pens. Instead, it’s a future of “goodness and mercy,” or more accurately, *chesed* or the Lord’s “covenant love,” his faithfulness to the agreement he has made with us: “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7). The Lord has a treaty with us, a defense treaty if you will, and we know he will honor his commitment.

And the Psalmist concludes with this affirmation: “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psalm 23:6). Sometimes people take this to mean heaven, but in the Bible this expression *beit-adonai*, “the Lord’s house,” usually refers to the sanctuary or place of worship. It stands for the tabernacle, where the Lord meets with his people, and then for the Temple in Jerusalem. As members of the flock of Christ our dwelling place is the place of worship. Together with David, in Psalm 27, we cry out, “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple” (Psalm 27:4).

But this expression in Hebrew, “the house of,” also means “the family of,” as in the phrase “the house of David” meaning the dynasty of David on the throne of Judah. The “house of the Lord” also means the Lord’s family, who are called by his name. We’re connected to other believers by family ties, a bond of mutual support and encouragement in the Lord. As the apostle Paul writes to the Galatians, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Not only this, but we’re connected with believers who have gone before us, what the creed calls “the communion of saints.”

Going beyond Psalm 23, Scripture often speaks of how the Lord cares for us, just as a shepherd cares for his flock. For example, Jesus tells his disciples, “I am the door of the sheep.” At night the sheep are gathered for protection into the circle of stones that form the sheep pen. But the enclosure has no gate, only a small opening. The shepherd beds down for the night right in the opening, a sentinel to block any lamb who might wander out of the enclosure, or to fend off any harmful intruder. The Lord is the protector of his flock, so we understand why Jesus can say, “I am the door of the sheep. . . . If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture” (John 10:7, 9).

In our Gospel reading Jesus declares, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). When a shepherd has worked with a flock of sheep over a period of time the sheep come to recognize his voice but not the voice of a stranger, and they will answer only to the voice of their own shepherd. As the Lord’s people we need to listen to his voice above all others. Many voices today are calling out to us, and to our loved ones, with false and misleading messages. For instance, children in our schools are especially vulnerable to sinister voices seeking to impose alien values on them, values their believing parents do not share because they’re contrary to the Word of God. But even as adults we’re bombarded daily with such alien voices through media or even through our own self-absorbed thoughts. As the flock of God we take care to listen to the one voice of our Shepherd, directing us into the straight path of fidelity to the Lord’s covenant with us.

Sheep, it turns out, are really dumb. We are not dumb, because we’re made in the image of God with the ability to discern what is true and wise. But if we’re not careful, and if we lay aside the guidance of the Word of God, we can make some dumb mistakes. One of these errors is to just “go along with the crowd,” whatever “crowd” we’re part of, and be led down a path that leads to sorrow and difficulty. Not long ago, in Turkey, a flock of some 1400 sheep rushed over a cliff because the first sheep went over the edge and the rest of them just followed blindly. Of that 1400, only four hundred died when they fell on the jagged rocks below. Why didn’t the other thousand die when they fell over the cliff? Because they fell on the bodies of the first four hundred, which cushioned the impact. If we just “go with the flow” of our cultural surroundings and blindly follow where others lead, we might “fall over the cliff” into some rocky places.

In my earlier life, before I knew the Lord, I did and said some dumb things that had a major impact on my life and that of others. Even though I had studied the Scriptures as my graduate field, I wasn't listening to the voice of the Shepherd but to alien voices from a sick cultural environment. Thankfully, the Lord got a hold on me and pulled me back to safety and amendment of life. We need to listen to the voice of our Shepherd.

Now, today is Mothers Day, and I wondered how to make the connection between sheep and shepherds and mothers. But, as a member of this church pointed out to me, "Mothers are shepherds, too." A noble mother does for her flock as a good shepherd does for his: providing for them, caring for them in their hurts, protecting them from harm, guiding them on a righteous path, leading them by example into a life of wisdom and discernment and care for others. But, truth be told, aren't we all shepherds in the body of Christ, looking out for one another and responding in a caring way to the need of our brothers and sisters in the Lord? In particular, the pastor is a shepherd, for that's what the word *pastor* means. Mothers Day can help us to think about sheep and shepherds in a larger dimension, as we all look to Jesus, whom the Letter of Hebrews calls "the great Shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13:20).

What's ironic, in a way, is that our Shepherd is also a Lamb, the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). The good Shepherd is also the sacrificial Lamb who, in his death on the cross, has atoned for the sin of his flock and delivered us from the punishing consequences of our stupidity. I told the story of the flock of sheep in Turkey that followed the first sheep over the cliff to their destruction. We, too, follow the Lamb "over the cliff," not to destruction but into resurrection life. So it will be said of us, and is declared in the words of the Book of Revelation, "They are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:15-17).