

April 21, 2024 4th Sunday of Easter  
St. John Lutheran Church "Are you a shepherd?"

As a young mother, one Christmas brought Brenda Nixon to despair. Amid all the holiday stress, her husband's job was shaky and the grim possibility of no income depressed her. She writes:

"Among my numerous responsibilities was teaching my three-year-old's Sunday school class at church. When I looked at the teacher's book, I saw that the lesson was on Jesus, the Good Shepherd. *What! The Good Shepherd?* I complained. *Surely something is wrong here. How does the Good Shepherd relate to the real meaning of Christmas? Besides, city kids can't relate to a shepherd.* My low spirit was evident as I criticized everything about this lesson.

Then the time came for class. We survived the art portion of the lesson, gluing cotton balls to sheep pictures, and had our juice and animal crackers. Then it was circle time. Turning to each rosy-cheeked cherub, I began with, "What is a *good* shepherd?" To which came my reminder of truth as one tot positively replied, "He picks up his sheep when they fall down." *Source: Cheryl Kirking, All Is Calm, All Is Bright, p.35-36 Revell, (2001)*

He picks up his sheep when they fall down. Are you a shepherd for others?

I don't know much about sheep. I was born and raised in the suburbs yet surrounded by fields and farms. Not only did we not have sheep, on our two acres with a one acre pond, we had a dog for a few years. Now, I have been to the sheep barns at Indiana and Missouri County Fairs, but that certainly doesn't make me an expert on sheep.

And as we grew up in Fort Wayne, Indiana, lamb chops sometimes called mutton were not on our menu. I was told they were expensive and their flavor wasn't always liked, especially by kids.

While sheep have not been a very important part of my life, sheep are one of the few livestock animals that are found virtually everywhere in the world. There are few places where sheep are not raised. In some western states, there are more sheep than people. Australia has ten times the number of sheep as people. The ratio of sheep to people in New Zealand is 20 to 1. That's a lot of sheep.

While I don't eat lamb and don't know much about sheep, I'll admit that I'm wearing a wool suit. You may be wearing woolen clothing as well. Wool is an amazing

product. It can be woven to be worn in all seasons—for summer clothes or for winter clothes. Woolen clothing is generally more expensive than just about anything else. They tell me that wool, in terms of weight to value, is one of the most expensive commodities purchased, sold, and exchanged in the world.

Whether we knew any of those things or not, we do know Psalm 23, because it is one of the most familiar and best-loved pieces of literature in the world. It is spoken by people in all languages. Young children memorize it easily and seem to understand what it has to say. At the same time, the oldest quote it and gain from it a perspective on life and comfort for life's realities. Few other poems can claim such popularity.

The psalm is so familiar that I don't have to bother asking you to look in the Bible to see what it has to say. You can memorize the words almost instantly: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures ... he restores my soul ... Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Such simple words; such familiar words; such profound words.

**"The Lord is my shepherd" is an expression of dependence, not independence."**

We often miss the depth of the meaning of Psalm 23 because we think we know what it has to say. Let's not miss out on understanding what we are really saying when we pray or speak, "The Lord is my shepherd." With those words, we Americans make *an unusual declaration of dependence*. We Americans value independence; we don't like other people to control us. We resent it when other people make decisions on our behalf. We prefer to be in the position of strength where others may be dependent upon us.

When I spent almost 10 years of my life working for Southwestern Bell Telephone, I worked with a group of men who had grown up at Bell. They had 30-50 years of service and had been installers, maintenance, cable installers but because of their service and the quality of their work were now supervisors. And independent, oh, my. Each of them kept a letter on them from the telephone company that said they were now eligible for retirement, and if a new manager came in to supervisor them, and they didn't like how that newbie did or said something, they would whip out those letters and say, try to make me change what I know is the best way to do things...and they were usually right.

People in our society have difficulty with authority. There is a sense in our country that anyone in a position of authority will try to control others or make others dependent. We like our independence. We don't want someone else deciding things for us. Because of all of this, it is a strange thing for someone to say the Lord is his shepherd. That is a voluntary declaration of dependence on God. And yet, as Christians, we must be shepherds to others as Christ is our shepherd.

King David, who wrote Psalm 23, was once a shepherd himself. He knew what every shepherd knows. Sheep come in two categories: wild and domestic. A highly domesticated sheep is highly dependent upon the shepherd. I'm told that of all the livestock, sheep can be counted among the most dependent, because they count on their shepherd for food, direction, protection, and treatment of disease.

When we call someone our shepherd, we are saying we need help, just like the little boy in Sunday School explaining what shepherd did. When we say the Lord is our shepherd, we are saying no one is better able to help us than God himself. We are saying we are basically foolish, and he is wise. We are quite ignorant, and he knows everything. We are weak, and he is strong. We are stupid, and he is smart. Most of all, we are saying that God is absolutely trustworthy, and we can depend on him. He has never been known to harm one of his sheep. He's never lost a single sheep. This great Lord is so committed and dedicated that he is even willing to put his life on the line for a single lamb.

A former shepherd, Phillip Keller, wrote a book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, tells about the author's experience as a shepherd in east Africa. The land adjacent to his was rented out to a tenant shepherd who didn't take very good care of his sheep: his land was overgrazed, eaten down to the ground; the sheep were thin, diseased by parasites, and attacked by wild animals. Keller remembered especially how the neighbor's sheep would line up at the fence and blankly stare in the direction of his green grass and his healthy sheep, almost as if they yearned to be delivered from their abusive shepherd. They longed to come to the other side of the fence and belong to him. Christians understand that the identity of the shepherd is everything. It is wonderful to be able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd."

**"The Lord is my shepherd" is a statement of ownership.**

In those five words, this declaration of dependence becomes an admission of ownership. A shepherd owns the sheep and marks them. Today the ears are pierced

with identification tags, but that's a fairly modern invention. For thousands of years, shepherds around the world marked the ears of their sheep by notching them with a sharp knife. Each shepherd had his own distinctive notch, so that even if the sheep gathered in a cluster, he could identify his own from a distance.

I think all of this is a lot like being a Christian. Christians are also those who admit to being owned and marked by Jesus Christ—sometimes marked painfully through suffering and difficulty.

An interesting verse in the New Testament describes Christians as those who bear crosses, almost as if we are marked by the cross of Jesus Christ, who can look at a gathering of people and instantly tell which ones are his and which ones are not. Those who bear his mark are his own. All this sounds rather unusual except to the person who says, "The Lord is my shepherd." Belonging to the shepherd is worth the pain, even if the mark must be carried for a lifetime. It's a privilege and a badge of honor to be identified as a Christian, one of God's own sheep. And God has every right to own us: He created us. We get confused about that sometimes. We sometimes think God exists for our benefit. We need to clearly understand that God created us for his benefit. We exist for his pleasure rather than the other way around.

God wanted to make a creature he could love. God didn't want robots that were forced to love him without choice. So God took a terrible gamble: He gave his human creatures the freedom to choose whether to love him or not. Isaiah 53:6 tells the result of God's gamble: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way." Although God has a right to own us because he created us, he gave us the option of freedom, and we all left. We chose sin and did not love him as he wanted to be loved. In response, he chose to send out his own son to look for us and find and redeem us at a terrible cost—the cost of his own life.

We as Christians are reluctant to let others know that we're not our own because we're bought with a price. Sometimes we're embarrassed to be Christians. We shouldn't be. Actually, it is the most wonderful admission of all to acknowledge that we are owned by God, that we bear the mark, that we're able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd."

**"The Lord is my shepherd" is an admittance of a personal relationship.**

We miss the point if we somehow think this talk of ownership is religious jargon, or if we miss the warmth and intimate confidence of the words "the Lord is my shepherd." I've heard people say that it is arrogant to be convinced that one is a

Christian, that we should never say it with certainty because we can't be sure. But what child should be confronted for saying, "That's my mom," or, "There goes my dad"? If there's anything you ought to be certain about, it's that kind of relationship. There's nothing at all strange about a person saying, "He's my Lord," or "He's my Savior," or, "He's my Shepherd." If I count him as mine, I'm a Christian.

Let's be sure we understand something: Reading the Bible or going to church, giving an offering or learning a psalm, creed, or prayer, will not make a person a Christian. To be a Christian is to choose Jesus Christ as Savior and Shepherd. To be a Christian is a deliberate decision to become one of God's own sheep and have a personal relationship with him.

Is the Lord your shepherd? Are you a shepherd for others through your love of others as a Christian? If so, you admit Christ's ownership of you, and you have the confidence of a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ which you share through daily life. Don't do it lightly. We talk here about a life-changing and eternal decision, something to be done decisively in faith. Follow our Shepherd, and be a shepherd for others. Amen.

*Based on a sermon shared by Leith Anderson pastor emeritus of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota.*