

## GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY - 4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

There are countless paintings of Christ holding a lamb and a staff portraying him as "the good shepherd". He appears this way as well in many children's bible stories, casting him in an image of a caring, kind and gentle saviour whose job it is to stand there with a glowing face, in what appears to be an easy job of being a shepherd. The church in which I was brought up in as a child and teenager had a magnificent, huge stained glass window of just this picture. Probably half of Christian art would disappear were it not for the popular image of Jesus as a shepherd

It is likely challenging for us who live here on the Pacific Coast to think about and relate to sheep raising and what exactly that entails. Personally, most of my information on sheep has come from looking at them in books as a child and singing Bah Bah Black Sheep and Mary Had a Little Lamb. Then as I got older looking at them from a distance in a field or watching a documentary on TV.

Jesus Christ, during His time here on earth knew everything; saw everything and understood everything. Nothing got passed Jesus. After all He is the Son of God. Now that being the case, why would He compare himself to a shepherd and why would He refer to us as His sheep and say that He is the gate to the sheepfold? Well, this makes perfect sense when talking about the time in which Jesus lived and Jesus often spoke in poetic metaphors to illustrate a point. Sheep and shepherds were plentiful. Shepherding is one of the oldest professions on earth. People in the Holy land were very familiar with seeing sheep and shepherds. Everyone needed them for food and clothing but being a shepherd was considered to be a very lowly profession - not one of status or prestige. Being a shepherd was actually a demanding and courageous job. The shepherd could never leave his flock. He would have to stay with them always to guard them against thieves and predators. He had to sleep outside under the stars, unable to bathe himself regularly, eat simply, and risk his life to save lost and hurt sheep.

I don't know about you, but when I read something in the Bible, it bothers me if I don't understand the circumstances surrounding a situation or the reason behind why something was said. I need to know the history behind the story and the cultural practices surrounding it. So to understand better why Jesus referred to himself as the shepherd and the gate and why He referred to us as sheep, I decided to learn a little more about raising sheep and what life is like as a shepherd. I thought it only appropriate however, to see as well what it is like today to be a "modern" day shepherd in North America and see if the metaphor still fits. Well, it more than fits. The metaphor that Jesus used is actually perfect and couldn't be more precise even to this day. Are you surprised? I think not.

While doing my research, I came across an article on line of a modern day shepherd by the name of Craig Rogers of Border Springs Farm in Patrick Springs, Virginia. He shared several important lessons about sheep that he has learned during his life as a shepherd and sheep farmer. Following are some of those lessons (highlighted in bold).

### **A Shepherd's life is most humble.**

The ancient work of caring for sheep has been viewed as lowly class over the ages. It involves the humble work of caring for the sick, ensuring the health of each individual, providing feed and shelter and protecting the safety and health of the flock. Shepherding requires more hands on work than most livestock farming. Jesus told us many times during his life here on earth that we are to care for those who are poor and marginalized and cannot care for themselves.

### **Sheep are smarter than everyone thinks they are. You just have to be smart enough to recognize it.**

Sheep have survived domestication since 10,000 BC. Their flocking instinct is in fact a community-based survival mechanism where they have learned that their strength is much greater in numbers and their comfort and survival is enhanced as a group rather than as an individual. Sheep recognize their shepherd's voice and respond to his call. This makes me think of how we as followers of Christ wish to and need to congregate together to gain strength and support from one another as a community of believers.

### **Shepherds tend to the flock but care for the individual**

Shepherds provide clean water, ample forage and shelter to an entire flock which is essential to maintaining the health of the flock. But the success of a shepherd is the compassion he has for each individual. The more concern the shepherd has for the individuals who are in need of health care, supplemental food assistance or individual attention, the healthier the flock. Christ has compassion for each one of us.

### **The joy of birth never gets old.**

It involves the lambing process (the birthing of lambs) and the reward is personal satisfaction in saving and bringing a new life into the world. We can only imagine the joy of God when a new life is born into this world and when we die to our old lives and find a new life in Christ.

### **Death on the farm is inevitable**

The shepherd takes care of this when it happens, but it is never easy. God is there for us in times of death to ease the suffering that often accompanies us leaving this world, and He comforts those left behind.

### **Happy lambs live in abundance**

Animals that get to graze on ample rich pastures, have crystal clear spring or well water and can live in peace of predators or the stress of wondering where the next meal comes from, will be the happiest. This is all provided by the shepherd. What joy we have when we let God into our lives and put our faith and trust in Him. Even though we have trials and tribulations like everyone else, with God as our mentor and guide we can live a rich, fulfilled life.

What has changed between sheep herding of a thousand years ago and sheep herding of today? Little. Yes, the shepherd doesn't have to sleep outside under the stars anymore. He most likely has the assistance of one or two trustworthy, hardworking sheep dogs.

His sheering methods are much more modern, and he can send his lambs away to be slaughtered for food rather than do it himself. But his involvement with his animals in caring for them, protecting them from thieves and predators, making sure they have food and water and stay healthy, helping them give birth, finding them when they are lost or in danger - that remains the same. It isn't difficult for us to see the comparison of us to sheep and Jesus as the shepherd.

In John verses 1-5 we can observe a couple of interesting things about the shepherd with whom Jesus identifies himself. This shepherd has the well-being of the sheep at heart, rather than his own well-being. This shepherd is neither thief nor bandit who would steal sheep. Jesus emphasizes a particular difference between the bandit and shepherd: the shepherd enters rightly, properly, and openly into the sheepfold. There is a relationship of trust among all parties here. The sheep hear, follow, flee false shepherds, and are able to know who to trust.

Jesus then turns to a clear statement of identity. Verses 7-10: "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep". He describes all who came before him as thieves and bandits to whom the sheep did not listen. Again Jesus says, "I am the gate," and then adds: "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture". Whereas "the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy," Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. The purpose of the gate is not to keep out other sheep. The purpose of the gate is to guard against all that threatens the well-being of the sheep.

What does it mean for us as followers of Jesus today, in our context, to be protected by the gate and the shepherd, to be "saved", to have a life in abundance? "Life" or "eternal life" in John's Gospel is not just about life after death. It is life that begins here and now; it is knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ whom God has sent. It is knowing the voice of the good shepherd who truly cares for us. It is life in community, finding security and nourishment as part of his flock. It is life that abounds in meaning and value and endures even beyond death.

Abundant life is protection, provision and presence of Jesus. Abundant life is knowing you will be safe and sound, trusting that your basic needs will be met, and believing that you are never alone. We need as people of faith to gather into the deep security of God's fold. Jesus shepherds the soul. He shows you how to let go. He walks through the gate first. Do you recognize the voice of the good shepherd over all the other voices promising abundance? Listen for His voice. Respond to His call. He is your shepherd and guardian of your soul.

Reference: Craig Rogers, Border Springs Farm, Patrick Springs, Virginia  
The Working Preacher, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

