

Good Shepherd Sunday 2025

St. Luke/San Lucas, 11 May 2025

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Psalms 23; Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Shepherd and our Guide. Amen.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, celebrated each year during the Easter season. Shepherd and sheep are popular topics in the Bible, appearing over 200 times in both literal and figurative contexts. And sometimes it seems like they are everywhere. In poetry, in songs, in artwork. How many Sunday school classes have a picture of Jesus with a lamb draped over his shoulders hanging on the wall? How many children grow up singing, “The Lord is my shepherd, I’ll walk with him always”? How many youth carefully memorize the 23rd psalm?

Yet I must admit that, as much as I appreciate the imagery, the beauty, the meaningful picture of Jesus as a good shepherd, guiding and protecting us, caring for us with tenderness, faithful and loving, still I have always found one part of this troubling. In short, while Jesus as the Good Shepherd is lovely, where does that leave us? Are we the sheep?

Because, in all honesty, I have never felt very sheep-like. Cute little lambs, with curly wool, jumping around on wobbly legs. Adult sheep searching out the greenest grass, following anyone who sets themselves up as leader. It always brings to mind the term “sheeple,” sheep people, those docile individuals who turn off their brains to follow whichever charismatic leader goes before them. Is that really who we are meant to be?

While I grew up in a rural area and we had cattle, chickens, ducks, etc., we actually never had sheep. So, I thought I’d do a bit of research. Are they really as dumb as they are portrayed as being? Are they really as innocent, as gullible? If so, how have they survived?

Sheep have what is known as a flocking trait. They are highly social animals who live in groups, flocks. These flocks provide them with protection from predators. Together they are stronger. Together they survive.

Sheep also form strong friendship bonds. They recognize each other, even after absences. They protect each other, and stand up for each other to the best of their limited abilities. They know which sheep belong to their flock and which ones are part of other groupings. In one of their negative traits, they can be very cliquish, pushing out those they view as outsiders. They are not a welcoming, affirming group.

While sheep have very poor judgment at times, they actually do have good memories. They remember people and places. They can recognize up to 50 other sheep and remember them for two years. They can even remember how to navigate complex mazes, once they have learned the path through.

Apparently sheep also experience complex emotions. Scientists have determined that sheep can display optimism, pessimism and empathy. Part of their flocking instinct appears to be related to their emotional links to others within their grouping. And those separated from their flocks and forced to live alone experience distress.

And, of course, sheep are famous for their following instinct. They will follow each other. They will follow their leader. They will even follow someone they know into potentially dangerous situations.

So, maybe sheep aren't so clueless after all. Like us, they are capable of forming strong bonds, of creating community, of living together. Like us, they have a range of emotions, and can feel empathy for one another. Like us, they are highly social, and need interaction in order to remain healthy. Like us, they can be exclusionary. And, like us, they can sometimes follow the wrong leader.

One of the keys to survival, for sheep and, perhaps for us as well, is who we chose to follow. In our gospel passage today, the people gathered at the temple are asking Jesus, Are you the Messiah? Are you our leader? Are you the one who will save us from Roman occupation, who will reestablish the throne of David, who will lead us back to glory? Are you the one we should follow?

Jesus' reply can be confusing—to them and to us. I told you and you do not believe. The works I do testify to me, but you do not believe. The people at the temple were looking for a charismatic leader to rescue them, while Jesus was a different type of leader. He did not remove them from their troubles, but rather walked with them through the difficult times. He showed them how to live in community, to care for each other, to watch out for those on the margins. He demonstrated how to be the Good Shepherd., caring, leading, guiding, not dominating or conquering.

In our own time, we are also faced with choices about who our leaders are, who we should follow. Many are competing to be our leader. They are promising glory, or riches, or a better life—if only we do what they say, if only we follow their lead.

How do we know which shepherd to follow? How do we know which way to go? Which one will take us to green pastures, which will revive our souls? Which will prepare a table for us and for those with whom we disagree?

Are we still looking for the Good Shepherd? Are we, like the people in the temple, unable to see what is right in front of us.

We don't need to find a human to follow. We have the life, the example and the teachings of Jesus. We can be kind to each other. We can protect each other. We can support and uphold each other. We can show empathy.

It won't always be easy, particularly not in the times in which we find ourselves. We may be called upon to take care of others in our flock. We may need to walk through dark valleys, to stand up to evil forces. Yet as we do so, we know that we are not alone. We need fear no evil. We will never be taken away from God.

As we go out into the world today, let us embrace our roles as sheep. Let us feed God's lambs. Let us care for each other. Let us sit down with those who trouble us. Let us follow the Good Shepherd, assured that, as we do so, we will always be in God's hands.

Amen.