

SERMON 854

Good Shepherd Sunday

May 11, 2014

945th Week as Priest

771st Week at St Dunstan's

36th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

SHEPHERDS AND SHEEP

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I may be one of the very few Episcopal priests ever to have practical experience in herding sheep. As an undergraduate at Auburn back in the early 1970s, I worked weekends at the Animal Nutrition Unit. One of my duties was to feed sheep, and move them from pen to pen. I also worked on a ranch in Alamosa, Colorado, one summer. My official job title was "cowboy," but the work also included sheep-herding. If I ever get around to updating my resume for Epiphany's web site, I suppose I should add my work record as "cowboy" and "shepherd."

Shepherds, you may know, are very low on the list of Most Desirable Occupations. This was true in ancient Israel,

and it is still true today. When Joseph brought Jacob and his family to live in Egypt, the Pharaoh and his people wanted nothing to do with them because they were shepherds, an unclean occupation. So Pharaoh gave them the Land of Goshen in which to live.

Shepherds get most of their bad reputation from the sheep. Sheep are noisy, fearful, anxious, willful, stubborn, contrary animals. They are dirty and smelly. They kick. They bleat. They do not cooperate or play well with others. When sheep are frightened, they bunch together. They run away from the shepherd. They jump and push their way through a gate, or out of a pen, or past the shepherd. Sheep are impolite, skittish, and terribly insecure.

If you want to herd sheep, you can forget riding a horse. Rounding them up like cows is completely impossible. They resist you, every step of the way, and they tend to do the very opposite of what you want them to do.

For instance, if you want to move a flock of sheep from here to there, you have to walk into the flock from the opposite direction. Then they will hurry on either side of you, running past as if you were going to murder them. Trying to

herd sheep is frustrating beyond belief to most people. Most people get angry and give up.

Sheep are not very intelligent animals. Pigs are infinitely smarter. A border collie can run circles around sheep—literally and intellectually. But sheep are just dumb.

Sheep can learn to be managed by one shepherd, but more than one shepherd is just confusing to them. Thus, most shepherds work alone, or with a pastoral dog.

My dogs, Nick and Rosie, are both what the English call pastoral dogs. They are shepherds, sheepherders, working dogs. And they are both very, very smart. A border collie like Nick, or an Australian shepherd like Rosie, can stare down a sheep. With very little physical effort, a good herding dog can move sheep together, into a pen, or through a gate. A good dog is worth a lot of money. What makes him good is that he intimidates the sheep. He scares them, just by looking at them. He might bark if necessary, but it's not what you would call common practice. Once in a while, a pastoral dog will nip the hind quarters or back leg of an uncooperative sheep. That really gets their attention!

You may have noticed that Nick can give people this stare, too. It freezes sheep and little bunnies, and small children in their tracks. Leigh calls it Nick's "Jedi Mind Meld."

I like to think of bishops as shepherds. They look like shepherds—dressed in a white alb and holding a shepherd's crook, or as they call it, a crozier. That staff, by the way, has practical use to a shepherd. He can use it to hook a wayward sheep by the neck. He can fight off a wolf or a bear with it. He can use it for support when he is walking. And, once in a while, he can poke a sheep with it to get them moving. But here's a secret: Bishops like to use as little effort as possible. And they want the flock to stay together.

Most bishops are good shepherds. They are calm and reassuring. They are patient and kind. A bishop walks among the sheep and talks to them. Sometimes he sings to the sheep. They know his voice.

Sheep tend to match the emotions of their shepherd. If the shepherd is angry or impatient, the sheep react immediately with fright and fear. Sheep, you see, live in a hostile world. They survive only by sticking together. And sheep without a good shepherd are a desperate community.

Priests are different. I think of them more like border collies. They wear black and white clericals just like a border collie. They are out in the field with the sheep. They run around in circles until they are so exhausted that they just drop. They get rough with a sheep now and then. They seldom bark, but when they do it's about something important. Their job is to stay with the sheep and care for the sheep. And the bishop needs them. A good bishop, just like a good shepherd, relies on their dogs to do most of the work. In other words, bishops are overseers, and priests work like dogs.

The truth is that sheep need to be cared for. They cannot fend for themselves. They require supervision and oversight. Sheep can't make independent decisions; they can only react to their immediate circumstances.

Sheep are never brave or heroic. They can become desperate and agitated, but they never start a fight. Their actions are always purely defensive.

Sheep like a routine, a sameness about what they do, where they go, and who they go with. Sheep dislike change. They don't adapt well to a new shepherd, a new sheep dog, or a change in the flock.

Sheep expect to be fed and given enough to drink. They cannot help themselves. They require constant, daily attention.

Sheep should never be allowed to wander off from the flock—but they will if the shepherd and the sheep dogs are not paying attention. Sheep get preoccupied and dreamy. They forget where they are. They can't tell time. And they have a terrible sense of direction. They are scared by storms, and loud noises, and any fast or abrupt movement.

Sheep basically all look alike, sound alike, and smell alike. They don't have distinct personalities. They all have the same rather dull personality. They avoid conflict. They flee from confrontation. Sheep don't revolt or rebel. They are happy with the way things are, as long as it's pretty good.

Sheep have no conscience, no guilt or remorse over their bad decisions and wrong choices. They operate on instinct, not reason. They are impulsive, situationally driven, and completely selfish. Sheep seldom learn from experience. Their lives are one big trial with lots of errors.

Sheep love peace and quiet. They never get bored. They never do anything they don't have to do. And they like to get

by on the least amount of effort possible. They are not ambitious or upwardly mobile. They have no sense of humor, and they never learn from their mistakes.

So why are we the sheep of our Lord's hand, and the people of his pasture? I suppose it's because, at times, we are all like sheep who have gone astray. And we always, always, have need of the Good Shepherd. **AMEN.**

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