

E A S T E R 4, for Apr. 26, 2026, Year A

- My first real impression of what sheep are like was while we lived in England. One day, we went for an afternoon walk out in the country with some close friends who owned a border collie. Crossing one of those fields with a flock of sheep, the dog got away from its owners and took off after the sheep. Untrained, and by virtue of her genetics, she did some herding as she ran after the sheep, but she also terrified them. So, they just ran every which way. Very quickly, those of us who had never been around sheep gained a distinct impression about them. Sheep are rather stupid. Yes, *it's true*.
- Left to their own devices, sheep can be rather *difficult* with one another, and destructive to their living environment. They tend to be *hierarchical* in a way based on power and willfulness, rather than on wisdom and good leadership. Most of all, sheep are prone to *anxiety*. They tend to be anxious, and blindly seek safety in a herd.
- Some of you may have heard of Phillip Keller or his books, the most well-known of which is *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. Keller was a farmer and an agronomist. His childhood in East Africa prepared him well for his later work as a sheep rancher in the American West. In his book on the 23rd Psalm, Keller reflects on its remarkable words: "He makes me lie down in green pastures..." "*The strange thing about sheep,*" he says, "is that because of their very make-up *it is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met.*" Learning these four requirements teaches us about God's understanding of our human nature.
- **First**, sheep will refuse to lie down if they have any fear. **Second**, sheep will not lie down if they experience any friction with other sheep. **Third**, sheep will not lie down if they are distressed by flies or other pests. And **fourth**, sheep will not lie down if they are hungry.

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- The literal 'restlessness' of sheep provides a good metaphor for our own restlessness as people. Fear often interrupts our rest, whether during our sleep at night, or while we deal with the pressures of the day. We have stress, that is often caused by responsibility we wrongly assume for other people's emotions and feelings. And this leads to friction between us. Like sheep, we compete with one another for control of our part of the pasture. We get distracted by pests and nuisances, sometimes by simple things like bugs or traffic congestion. Finally, though most of us have never known real physical hunger, we all have spiritual hunger to know God more fully, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him.
- When Jesus spoke about himself as the good shepherd, he surely had in mind all these characteristic traits of sheep. They are unflattering, but they remind us of something true about ourselves: we have a real need for him to be our shepherd. For only the good shepherd can deal effectively with all four of those things which keep sheep from being at rest. Indeed, without a good shepherd, the sheep are even more likely to end up in panic, distress, in conflict, and hungry. This is why the good shepherd carries a rod and a staff which - at least for sheep - bring comfort.
- The rod is used to ward off adversaries and help inspect the real condition of the sheep. And the staff is used to lead and guide the sheep, tending them in the right direction and lifting them out of trouble when they fall into holes. Here the difference between real sheep, and the metaphorical sheep within God's fold, becomes noticeable. Phillip Keller gives ample evidence of the way that sheep are calmed by the presence of their shepherd. The mere appearance of the shepherd among the flock can settle a group of sheep that are fearful and distracted.
- But it is more difficult for us as human beings to find ourselves in the same kind of relationship with the good shepherd. For we are much more

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reluctant to be led, to accept guidance that is not in accord with our own inclinations, and contrary to our settled plans.

- This is where the heart of Jesus' teaching is so important. "I know my own, and my own know me," he says. This is just like his relationship with our Father in heaven. To know him is much more than to know about him. To know him is to know a person, just as we know other persons in relationship. Relationships can be complex and relationships take time to form, precisely because we are never simple or two-dimensional in our character. Because his relationship with us is so important, as is ours with him, he willingly lays his life down for us, so that he may share its power with us.
- The promise of Easter is the promise of abiding personal presence. We remain finite and limited, which we find hard to accept. Even if we are leaders in everyday life, *we still need leadership*. Being like sheep, we always need a good shepherd like Jesus. He it is, who leads us into Godly rest, into the fullness of life, as we allow him to be our shepherd. Allowing Jesus to be our Good Shepherd means we don't need to try and know everything ourselves. It is to accept that, in fact, we cannot know everything ourselves, and that we need leading and guiding from the Lord who is willing to walk behind us.
- This may be the most powerful aspect of Jesus' metaphor of being our good shepherd. Leadership is so often for us as being like someone who stands or walks *before* others, and who has *followers*. But with sheep it is entirely different, and more like the herding of cats. Since sheep are constantly prone to scatter, or to go their own way, a shepherd cannot walk out in front of a flock. Because not many of them will come along behind. Instead, the shepherd must walk *behind* the flock, often out of sight, though still within touch. Quite often, the sheep may not even be aware that they

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are, in fact, “being led.” But by gently prodding and guiding with the staff, the shepherd steers the flock toward the green pastures and cool waters.

- We should not be surprised, therefore, if the Lord as our good shepherd is not in sight, not visibly and literally out in front of us, leading us toward where he would have us go. He does not impose himself upon us as becomes our good shepherd, who knows us better than we know ourselves. Instead, we are more likely to sense his presence by feeling a tap on our side, a gentle nudge or prod this way or that. We will hear his voice by listening for him to speak, through our prayers and through his Word. This calls for quiet, undistracted attentiveness, which helps us come to know the Lord of Life who guides us as the good shepherd.



John 10:1-10

Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”