

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Sheep! It's a strange thing to contemplate, but what about sheep? I am the first to admit that I am a 'city boy,' and know very little about raising livestock or agriculture. So, I've had to do my best to learn something about sheep, as well as being a shepherd.

Sheep are often considered to be dumb, but in reality aren't as dumb as what we think. They are equipped with a flocking instinct. They recognize that they are safer and more resilient in a group than they are alone. They also have the ability to recognize the faces of other sheep and humans for up to two years, as well as their voices. In terms of human voice recognition, they learn to recognize the voice of their shepherd. They may not understand the meaning of the command, but they know that the voice of the shepherd is one of safety and survival, especially in domestic flocks.

Domestic sheep rely completely on their shepherd for food, shelter, and protection. The shepherd comes to know each of the sheep, their personalities, their needs, and their behavior. The shepherd is constantly looking for those who are sick or afflicted in some way. They work to keep the sheep in the fold, and to reclaim any who may wander off, endangering their well-being, or becoming victim to a predator.

But the success of a shepherd or shepherdess is in the compassion they have for each individual. This means being able to identify a sick or injured sheep or lamb within a flock of hundreds or thousands of sheep. Assisting with the birth of a lamb when needed, caring for a lamb orphaned by its mother, providing the expectant mother with enhanced nutrition or weaning a lamb in a compassionate manner are all part of that job. 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 and the more profitable the whole operation is.

When a sudden crisis hits, such as the threat by a predator, or a strange voice, sheep tend to scatter, again leaving them vulnerable by being alone. Being a flocking animal, other startled sheep may follow behind one of the scattered sheep. The rogue sheep may entice others to follow it, leading them all to potential danger or demise. This, of course, gives us the impression that sheep are dumb.

Rather than considering it as being dumb, it is more of a sense of trust and loyalty.

The shepherd relies heavily on his faithful companions, the border collie. These dogs orient the direction of sheep, protect the weak from danger, and guide the flock towards safe pasture. They are the shepherd's faithful partners, and are faithful servants through thick and thin.

It is probably not a stretch to see how this fits into our readings today. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and we are his sheep. He provides all we need for eternal life, and gives us the needed peace to endure what life throws at us. As his flock,

we are safer in community. If we stick together and support each other, we are better equipped to ward off danger. Like sheep, we are not dumb, but rather intelligent. But we don't always make the best decisions. It also means that the 'predators' of life can scare us away from the flock, and we run away from the protection offered by Jesus within the community. And when we flee, sometimes we take others with us. Like the shepherd, Jesus is always on the lookout for those of us who are in need of healing, or lost, and seeks us out to bring us back into the fold, and will not let any of his sheep be lost. OK – sermon done?

I'm not sure. What about the border collies? What about this thing in Revelation about Jesus being the Lamb of God? In John's Gospel, Jesus tells his followers that he and God are one. That means that God is a Lamb. How can Jesus be the Good Shepherd, and a sheep? And, what we know about sheep seems inconsistent with God or Jesus.

In a homily in 2013 Pope Francis asked that priests "be shepherds with the smell of sheep." Jesus literally embodied this principle in the Incarnation by becoming the shepherd who joins the flock.

This is why Jesus, the Good Shepherd, can say, "I know my own and my own know me," for he became one of us and knows intimately who we are and our lives.

An article in American Magazine states that, “the image of Jesus the Lamb tells us that our God came to be one of us, to walk in solidarity with us, to die for us, not to control us. The Good Shepherd knows who we are, cares for us, and has our best interests at stake. If we are we willing to hear the Good Shepherd, we will know our true worth.

In fact, knowing that we belong to the Good Shepherd is the source of all of our value. God loved us enough to become one of us. To know God is to know ourselves and our worth; to love God is to love ourselves for who we are: sheep who know the shepherd, who hear his call and who respond to the voice of God.”

In Revelation, John receives an image of the flock, not a tiny, rump herd, but “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.” Though these members of the flock had suffered earthly loss, the Shepherd’s promise was true: “They will never perish.” In fact, it is not just life that the Shepherd gives but also the promise of abundant life: There will no longer be hunger or thirst or even the harshness of a scorching sun, “for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from

their eyes.” The Good Shepherd, one of us, a sheep like us, is the very God who has prepared for us an eternal home and who leads us home to paradise.

In our world today, we are surrounded by hunger, thirst, and pain. We are drowning in tears, and being torn apart by hate and pride. We see wars in Russia/Ukraine, Ethiopia (civil war), Yemen (civil war), a drug war in Mexico, and unrest in Afghanistan. Starvation and poverty levels are at crisis levels in Asia and Africa.

In our own country, we are living in a time of moral war. Rather than embracing the flock mentality, ensuring the dignity and well-being of all, it appears that many are fleeing the flock to pursue personal freedom. Rather than coming together to preserve every phase of life, battles over the value of our unborn, the elderly, and the convicted are being challenged. Where is our Good Shepherd? Where is the peace that Psalm 23 speaks of? Where is the protection that Jesus spoke of in our Gospel today? Where is the Lamb of God who sits on the Throne in heaven?

Here is where the border collies come into the picture. Just as Jesus is both shepherd and sheep, we are both sheep and border collies. As sheep, we listen for our shepherd’s voice. We may not fully understand what we are being told, but we lean in and follow his voice. We, as a community, as a flock, unite to trust in our shepherd, to protect each other, and to nurture each other. As border collies, we

2022-05-08 Fourth Sunday of Easter – cycle C

are called to seek out those who are compromised, the poor, the elderly, the disabled, the unborn, the death row inmates, the broken, and to protect them from further threats. As a border collie, we are also called to seek the runaways and the lost, and welcome them back into the fold. You and me are God's border collies.