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Title: The Lord Is My...

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Scripture: [John 10:11-18](#)

Text: [Psalm 23](#)

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Here we are on the 4th Sunday after Easter, but who's counting? You may have lost track but it is significant because every year, on the fourth Sunday, churches around the world celebrate "Shepherd Sunday." It has been recognized as such since the 16th century. There is a reason. The season of Easter is six weeks long before it

gives way to the birth of the church on Pentecost. But there aren't six weeks of Easter stories. So, the church looked around and said, "How will we celebrate our Risen Savior?" I know. We'll celebrate who he said he is and since Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd" so Shepherd Sunday was born.

But understanding that the Risen Savior was the Good Shepherd dates well before the 16th century. It really is the first image that the followers of Jesus embraced. All of the 1st and 2nd-century art found in the catacombs depicted Jesus as a Shepherd. Crucified images of Jesus on a cross don't show up until the 6th century. Jesus was first depicted as the Good Shepherd with sheep around him or on his shoulders because to be a shepherd you to have sheep.

I'll confess that I don't know much about sheep. I had a terrifying experience feeding a lamb when I was four. I thought the little lamb was too aggressive sucking on the bottle I was holding. It is a family myth which I guess scarred me for life because I'll admit it. I never visit the sheep barn at the State Fair.

I do know this. I like to eat lamb even though I never tasted it as a child. For some reason, my family thought lamb was significantly inferior to beef. That could have been because I grew up in Oklahoma and Texas where cattle are king. But I understand that most Americans have the same opinion. It is why there isn't a McMutton sandwich at McDonald's.

It creates a little bit of a challenge connecting with Shepherd's Sunday that other people in the world don't have. Sheep are one of the few livestock animals that are found almost everywhere in the world. There are very few

places that sheep are not raised. While they make up only 1% of the livestock in our country, in some countries, there are more sheep than people. Australia has ten times more sheep than people which is why you can buy a McMutton there. That's a lot of sheep but it doesn't compare with New Zealand which is twenty times more sheep than people.

Those type of ratios of sheep to people are of biblical proportion. From both scripture and other historical records, the number of sheep raised in Palestine was immense. Jesus saying, "I am the good shepherd" connected with them in a way that maybe doesn't nor can't with us. They had a first-hand experience of sheep and shepherds which we don't have. It's not surprising that they connected Jesus declaration, "I am the Good Shepherd" with of the most beloved passages in all scripture, the Psalm 23.

I don't need to read it. You know it. Say it along with me although I know, there will be some stumble words. Some of the phrases have changed, depending on which version you first learned.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." (Psalm 23:1-6)

No thy and thous, no shadow of the valley of death, no forever, but my whole life long. But looking past the stumble words and the new translations, what does it mean to you? When you hear this Psalm, which is almost always at funerals, when you say it, prayerfully in times of needs or the passing of loved one, what does it really mean? In light of the victory of Easter and the statement that Jesus makes that he is the Good Shepherd makes, what does it mean to say, "The Lord is my shepherd."

To call Jesus your shepherd is to declare that you are sheep and as such, dependent. The Lord is my shepherd is a statement about of dependence. You are dependent sheep. As comforting as the line feels, as bucolic as it sounds, there is something terribly counter-cultural if not downright un-American in that simple phrase, "The Lord is my shepherd."

For one thing, sheep are vulnerable, stubborn creatures who wander, get lost, and fall into valleys. They aren't the brightest creatures in God's good creation. They have to be lead and guided. They are so stupid that when they wander and get lost, they baaaah...which if you stop to think about it, is better than a dinner bell.¹ To be sheep is to say, we are not the strongest of the strong but the weakest of the weak, totally dependent on the shepherd.

I suspect you have never thought of it that way but when you do, it is a little offensive. We value independence. We don't like any to control us. We prefer to be in the position of strength where others are dependent on us. But to say, "The Lord is my shepherd" is a voluntary declaration of dependence.

Scripture says that David, who was once a shepherd, wrote this Psalm. He knew that among all livestock, sheep are the most dependent animals, counting on the shepherd for everything, for food, direction, protection, and care. When we call someone our shepherd, we are saying, we need help, we need the shepherd to find green pastures and still waters. We can't feed and nourish ourselves. We are utterly dependent on you as Good Shepherd to spread a table before us. To say "The Lord is my shepherd." is to make a statement of dependence.²

It is also a statement of identity. To say, "the Lord is my shepherd" is an admission of ownership. A shepherd owns his sheep and he marks them. Today, I'm told, sheep are marked with identification ear tags, a fairly modern convention. But thousands of years ago, shepherds would notch the ear or horns, each with his own distinctive brand so that if there was never any dispute about ownership.

But those disputes were rare because what Jesus said is right when he said, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." One of the amazing characteristics of sheep is their ability to know the sounds and voice of their shepherd. Various flocks would be at a watering hold or held in pens overnight. They would get all mixed up. Then, when the time came to be led to pasture, the sheep would be separated by the sound of the shepherd's voice, a distinct call, a whistle, even a tune. And their own sheep would follow because they knew the voice of their shepherd who owns them. Every sheep had clarity about who owned them.

To say, "The Lord is my shepherd" is to declare that you are owned and marked by Jesus. We are marked by the cross. The New Testament describes Christians as those who bear the cross of Jesus. When you stop and think about it, it is a gruesome image, to bear a symbol of murder and bloody torture. But not when you realize that it identifies us with the one sent to find us and bring us back home to the family, because if the truth is told, "All we, like sheep, have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way." (Isaiah 53:6) In response, God sent Jesus to look for us, find us and redeem us at a terrible cost, the cost of his own life. Back in the family, you are owned by and God and are marked by the cross. You may not think of it that way when you say, "the Lord is my shepherd" but you are making a statement of identity, you are marked.

It is a statement of dependence. It is also a statement of identity and it is a statement of direction. When we say the Lord is our shepherd, we are basically saying, "I am foolish and you are wise. I can wander and get lost and I trust you show me the right paths. No one is better able to help than you, so I'll yield my life to your authority and direction, I will let your rod and staff comfort me." That is what that phrase means. The shepherd wore the rod at his waist and it was an offensive weapon, like a nightstick, used to ward off aggressors and enforce conformity with the shepherd's wish. It sometimes was even thrown to deliver a fatal blow to the skull of a wild animal or robber. ³

The "staff" was a protective device: it was used to guide the sheep, to nudge them in directions they may not wish to go, to rescue them from cliffs, to steer them lovingly and to bring them home. The "staff" was a symbol of friendship, of care and but also discipline.

To yield your life to the rod and staff is to say that no one no one is better able to help you; that the Good Shepherd alone is absolutely worthy of your trust, that you can and do totally depend on him to be your authority, to guide and direct your life.

It is a statement of dependence. It is a statement of identity and it is a statement of direction and finally, to say, "The Lord is my shepherd, is a declaration of a personal relationship.

It is what makes this an Easter passage, why the first Christians gravitated to the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It wasn't just Jesus declaration, it was the experience of shepherding. Shepherds have an uncanny ability to know each of their sheep by name, no matter how big the flock. They have a personal relationship and we do too. To be a Christian is to choose Jesus Christ as Savior and Shepherd. To be a Christian is a deliberate decision to become one of God's own sheep and have a personal relationship with him.

I have shared with you before the tender story told by Leith Anderson. It was a favorite story of his father, also a pastor. It was about a little boy who was desperately ill. His parents recognized that he probably would die soon, so they sent for the local pastor. He came at night to visit the child. He was unable to speak but acknowledged and listened to the pastor's presence who was alone with the child in an upstairs room.

He explained to that child on the edge of eternity not only the importance of being a Christian but also, in a child's language, how to become one. He had taken their son's hand, held the boy's thumb, and said, "*The*—because we're talking about one of a kind." Then he held his forefinger and said, "*Lord*." Next, he held the middle finger and said, "God himself *is* right here." Holding the ring finger, he said, "*My*—a personal commitment and relationship."

Finally, he held the pinky and said, "*Shepherd*—the one who owns us, died for us, cares for and loves us—Jesus." While he had not spoken, the child nodded and then, began to touch each of his fingers as if to say, "The Lord is my shepherd."

The pastor left with promises to return the next morning. When he did, unfortunately, he discovered that the boy had died. He did his best to console the parents. He listened to them. He grieved with them and just before he prayed with them, the parents asked the pastor if he had any explanation for something that had happened.

They told the pastor that in the hours before their son died and at the time of his death, he was holding the ring finger of one hand with his other hand. He died in that position. ⁴Of course, he said yes, he understood. And I hope you understand. To say the Lord is my shepherd is to affirm the personal relationship of this lifetime and the next.

The Lord is my shepherd. Is he? Is the Lord your shepherd? When you say that, you are making a declaration of a dependent. You are stating your identity and yielding your life to his direction and authority. And, you are affirming that in this relationship with God through Jesus, you have a Savior there is nothing more powerful or personal than saying "the Lord is my Shepherd."

¹ Micheli, Jason. A Sheep without words. http://day1.org/8183-jason_micheli_a_sheep_without_verbs

² Anderson, Leith. The Lord is Shepherd. Retrieved by subscription at preachingtoday.com.

³ Power E. The shepherd's two rods in modern Palestine and in some passages of the Old Testament. *Biblica* [serial online]. October 1928;9(4):434-442. Available from: ATLASerials, Religion Collection, Ipswich, MA. Accessed April 13, 2018.

⁴ Anderson.