

Easter II (14 April 2024)

“I am the good shepherd; and know my sheep, and am known of mine, even as the Father knoweth me, and I know the Father”;

+In the Name...

How many famous sheep can you name? Any? Any at all? Did you think of the Brooks Brothers mascot? Perhaps Lambchop came to mind. I suppose that she is not really a sheep but an extension of her puppeteer Shari Lewis, but for our purposes, we can consider her a sheep. Have we exhausted your list? When one considers all the anthropomorphic animals out there, compliments of Disney, Warner Brothers, Hanna-Barbera and many others, we can name dogs, cats, rabbits, pigs, and bears... Oh, the bears. Sheep seem to be a no-show. Spoiler alert: If you have not seen the movie Zootopia and do not want the end ruined for you, you will want to tune out for the next minute. The evil mastermind of this relatively recent movie is a sheep, but the fact

that she is the villain could keep her from many favorite lists. (If memory serves, she had a relatively minor role in the movie, likely so we would be less likely to suspect her.) In the Christmas classic Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street, Susan tells of the children in the basement pretending to be lions and bears: no sheep mentioned. Fans of George Orwell might remember the sheep in Animal Farm. They could always be counted on to interrupt the conversation if someone was trying to have an argument with the pigs, that is the ruling classes. Well, not “classes” of course, because all animals were created equal, if you recall. They would start bleating in unison, “Four legs good, two legs bad”, or whatever the mantra was.

And that seems to be the reputation that sheep have. They are not thinkers or leaders, but followers. I grew up in the city, so I have practically no first-hand knowledge of sheep. I did however, go to college in Montana, where sheep ranchers are almost as plentiful as the jokes about them! My friends there tell

me that sheep really are as dumb as their reputation suggests.

And as Animal Farm suggests, they tend to follow the crowd.

Are you offended yet? I do not mean by my sermon, although I do not doubt that is possible, especially if you are a member of the Sheep Herders Union, but I mean because the Bible, and Our Lord particularly, compare humans to sheep. Based on what I have already said, sheep are obviously not our favorite animals, based on the heroes of books, shows, and what plush animals small children drag around with them. Does Our Lord think that we humans are brainless? I think I shall give the classic lawyer-ly answer of “That depends”!

There are several reasons that humans could remind Our Lord of sheep:

1. They have no real sense of direction: they will follow the lead sheep wherever if he is going, including off a cliff. While writing this sermon, I was directed to a news story that appears to be legitimate: 1,500 sheep plunged off a cliff in Turkey while the

shepherds were eating their breakfast. The bad news is that the first 400 sheep off the cliff died; the good news is that the second 1,100 lived because their fall was broken by the first 400. The story is just so ridiculous it must be true! But even if it is not, we humans can have a lousy sense of direction. I do not mean that if we are on the corner of I-5 and the Banfield that we cannot find downtown Portland, but we have a nasty habit of chasing after things that are not good for us – sins. We know what a sin is. We know what it looks like. We know we should not want it, but we go chasing after it anyway!

2. Sheep are basically defenseless, and so are we without technology. Have you ever heard a sheep growl or bear its teeth? Of course not. A sheep can kick, which a ewe will do if she thinks her lamb is being threatened, but beyond that there is not much a sheep can do to defend itself. Now look at humans: compared to the other beasts out there, we do not have sharp claws, sharp teeth, or protective scales. We cannot sting or emit poison. Like a

sheep, we offer only slightly more resistance than a package of lunch meat if we were to be dropped into the middle of the wilderness sans technology. We need God, who gave us our intellect, the same way sheep need a shepherd. Which brings us to our next similarity:

3. Sheep are emotional and recognize a shepherd's voice.

After spending time around each other and their shepherd, sheep will both recognize one another and the voice of the shepherd. In fact, the voice of another shepherd whom the sheep do not recognize will scare them. The job of the shepherd is to guide the sheep where they need to go. Sometimes they cannot see where that is, but the shepherd knows best. For instance, he might lead them past a pond of muddy water to get them to a crystal-clear stream. Or he might lead them past a mediocre field to bring them to one of lush green grass. Our Lord does the same thing for us. Sometimes we have trouble discerning His voice, but that is likely

because we do not spend nearly as much time with Him as the sheep do with their shepherd.

Sometimes we humans seem to get a little confused and think that we are goats instead of sheep. Now, I must confess that I have gotten a great deal of enjoyment over the years from those goats that one sees at petting zoos or fall fairs: they stand on their houses, walk on those unstable looking bridges, and just generally seem to have a lot more personality than do sheep. That being said, Our Lord does not have nearly as charitable things to say about goats: they are known for being independent, opinionated and strong-willed. (Oh dear, I think I once knew a Rector with those qualities...) We do not want to follow our shepherd because we know best. Part of this is worsened by our culture: everyone is an expert in everything that he wants to be, regardless of whether he has any clue what he is talking about, but it does seem to be part of our wiring as well. We humans are just not as good at

fighting against it as we once were because the culture tells us that we shouldn't.

But in case you were starting to think that God compares us to sheep merely because He loves a good joke, sheep are also symbols of purity, innocence, and value. Christ is the Lamb of God, the pure and unspotted sacrifice. Throughout much of history, an owner of many sheep was a wealthy man. Think of the wool trade that put some of the great English cities on the map, and brings us back to Brooks Brothers, which I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon.

What is the most famous Psalm in the Psalter? Arguably the Shepherd's Psalm, or Psalm 23. It begins, "The Lord is my Shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing." If we turn our wills over to God, He will provide everything we need. I am very poor at this: I am constantly telling God what His will should be. Think about the audacity of that: some middle-aged priest in Oregon telling the Creator of the Universe how He should be running things! But

that is okay (for now) because the Psalm says that He will convert my soul. But it will be worth it to me if I can just give up my pride because His “loving-kindness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life”; but that is not the good part, even though I hope to be around for awhile yet! The Psalmist promises, “I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” That is ultimately where He is trying to lead me, if I will just let Him! “Lord Jesus, please help me to be a sheep and not a goat!”

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