

**“Baa, Baa, Black Sheep”**  
**Easter IV**  
**May 10-11, 2025**

Many years ago, I served a little one room, country church, on a mountain ridge in Pennsylvania. There was nothing special about it. The church had no steeple, no stained-glass windows; just a little white country church, in the middle of a cemetery.

About its only distinguishing feature was an old painting hanging on the wall behind the Communion table. It was a painting of Christ, the Good Shepherd. I had no idea where it came from or who painted it. But I often found myself sitting in the front pew of that little country church, waiting for the service to begin, staring at that painting.

One thing always caught my eye. I don't think I've ever seen anything else like it. There was the Good Shepherd, of course, carrying a lamb in his arms – very traditional. There were the sheep, the green pastures, the quiet waters; and almost hidden behind the figure of the Shepherd, peeking out from around the folds of his robe, was one, small, black sheep.

The thought often ran through my mind: What was the painter trying to say? Was it just a whim that made him put that black sheep closest to the Shepherd? Or did the artist have someone in mind – possibly even himself – when he put that

little black sheep in the painting? And so I wondered, as I sat in that little country church, just who was that black sheep? Maybe it was me!

Now I have to admit, my experience with sheep is somewhat limited. A couple of times I've seen them grazing – from a distance. On a trip to the Holy Land I saw shepherds along the roadside, watching over their sheep. Interestingly, the shepherds were all women. I took my grandson, Tucker, to the Barnstable County Fair one year, and we got to pet the sheep. I wasn't impressed. Most of what I've heard about sheep is not very flattering. They don't seem particularly bright. They have a tendency to wander off and get lost. And, in general, if you've seen one sheep, you've seen them all!

But I know that the image of the shepherd and the sheep is found all through the Bible. In the Old Testament, the king was often compared to a shepherd; David was a shepherd before God called him to be king over Israel. And of course, there are the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd”. Jesus himself uses the image of the shepherd and the sheep. “I am the Good Shepherd,” he says. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me...”

Still, it's kind of hard to see myself as a sheep. Maybe we could find a better image than shepherds and sheep – something more contemporary. How about, “I am the AI super-computer; you are instantly retrievable”? Nooo, that doesn't quite cut it, does it? Well, then, what about, “Social Security has my

number; I shall not want”? No, I don’t think that works, either. Especially these days....

There’s just something about the image of the shepherd and the sheep that’s hard to replace. And here’s where we get to the heart of the matter. The Bible compares us to sheep. And what do sheep do? Well, whatever the rest of the flock does! Sheep are herd animals, which is both their strength and their weakness.

There was a delightful article in the New York Times this weekend, about a doctor at New York-Presbyterian-Queens hospital who de-stresses from his high pressure job by escaping to a New Jersey farm on weekends to herd sheep with his two Border collies. Five mornings a week, he’s the chief of cardiology at Queens hospital; but on Sunday mornings, he’s on a grassy field at a farm in Hackettstown, teaching his Border collies, Cosmo and Luna, how to herd sheep. He says that the real challenge for the dogs is learning how to separate the sheep into two groups, because sheep instinctively want to stay together as a herd.

The herd instinct is so strong, a sheep will follow the rest of the flock no matter what. That happens with people too, by the way. If you watch the commercials on TV, notice how often the pitch is, “Everyone else has one, everyone else wants one, call today!” Our entire consumer economy depends on the herd instinct. In most cases, that’s relatively harmless. But when we let the

herd instinct overpower our personal, public and moral choices, very bad things can happen. And we've seen a lot of that in recent days.

Another characteristic of sheep is how they tend to wander off and get lost. Now you might ask how is that possible for an animal with such a strong herd instinct. But sheep have trouble seeing beyond their noses. They tend to keep their heads down, nibbling their way from one little tuft of grass to the next, to the next; never looking up, never looking beyond the next little bit of food, the next tempting morsel ... until gradually, they wander off from the herd and get lost!

And isn't that a perfect description of human nature? We're all so busy chasing that next little tuft of grass, that next tasty morsel – just a little more money, a bigger house, a newer car, a more impressive job title, more gadgets – and we're so focused on the immediate goals in front of us, that one day we look up, and discover that we're really lost. Like sheep, we focus on what's right in front of us and fail to see the big picture. As Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

That's why the image of the Shepherd is such a great description of Jesus. Because it's the Shepherd who comes looking for that poor lost sheep. "And when he finds it, he carries it home on his shoulders, rejoicing, for the lost that is found."

This is the Good Shepherd, the One who knows the sheep, who cares about them, who calls them by name. One of the great delusions of life is to think that

we are not like sheep. And we all do it: We like to think of ourselves as strong, self-reliant; “captain of my soul and master of my destiny”. I’m no sheep! Yeah, right!

The fact of the matter is that we are like sheep – and there are lots of wolves out there ready and eager to fleece us. Everyone else has one! Call today! But the good news is that God has provided a Shepherd for us, and that Shepherd is Jesus Christ. “My sheep hear my voice,” he says, “and I know them. I call them by name and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one can snatch them out of my hand.” Because he is the Good Shepherd, who knows us and calls us by name; who loves us – and who lays down his life for the sheep.

Yeah, even that little black sheep, hiding there by the Shepherd’s side. It’s taken me a lot of years to appreciate the painting in that little country church. But that picture says to me, and to you, that whoever you are, and whatever you’ve done, no matter how far you’ve strayed, the Shepherd knows *you*; and cares, and loves, and seeks his lost sheep. Here, in this place, he makes us to lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside still waters. He prepares a table before us ... and our cup runneth over. He is the Good Shepherd. Amen.