

# The Fourth Sunday of Easter

## Readings

Acts 2:42-47

I Peter 2: 19-25

John 10:1-10

Psalm 23

## Collect

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

† In the name of the one who loves us. Already loves us.

There are sheep living at was the end of our road.

Past tense, because I no longer live on that road, but I have spent time with these sheep. For weeks of their owners vacations, I have fed them, watered them and mucked their barn. I have spoken kindly to them and brought really expensive oat and honey dog biscuits. I've jumped out of bed at 3am and ran down the road to make sure that I'd turned on the electric fence. (As well as sheep, there are coyote at the end of that road.)

So I believe I am sufficiently experienced to break it to you that sheep are not impressive animals. They are not bright. They are not grateful. Not only do they not remember you from day to day but they don't care. They make that totally evident. And they smell, oh! A dinner out with friends immediately after tending sheep will clear the restaurant. I know.

All of this is true in my experience but I belabor it because today is Good Shepherd Sunday, the fourth Sunday in easter, when out of a different gospel, each year Jesus looks over at us and says: You! *You are my sheep.*

This is not a compliment. Or rather, it is not primarily a compliment about us. It is a statement about the shepherd.

Psalm 23 is the most beloved piece of scripture in the English-speaking world. People in their fifties who haven't opened a Bible since their confirmation can still recite it. It shows up at bedsides and gravesides, in moments of terror and grief, in the last clear thoughts of people leaving this world. If Amanda had lost her place, (which she would absolutely never do) most of you could have concluded the psalm. And what it says, at its core, is this: the Lord is *my* shepherd. Not a shepherd in general. Mine. Personally. By name.

That's what the gospel picks up on. Jesus doesn't say the good shepherd knows the flock as a crowd, a category, God forbid, as a demographic. He says the shepherd calls each of his own sheep *by name*. There's something almost embarrassing about that kind of attention. Not "I know your type." Not "I see what you are." But: I know *you*. I know your name. I know the specific, unrepeatable, occasionally baffling shape of your particular life, and I have chosen it.

Sheep, to be clear, aren't worth it. They do not earn this quality of attention. The sheep on my road have done nothing to deserve my affection or my visits. They have no idea what I've done for them. They wander off, they make decisions that would concern any observer.

We talk a lot in the church about following Jesus, and that's right, we should. But I think we sometimes imagine that following is the thing that earns us the relationship. That if we can just get our act together, keep up with the flock, stay on the right side of the fence, *then* we'll be the worthy sheep. But that's not how shepherds work. The shepherd doesn't acquire sheep because scored highly on, oh, I dunno, some sort of Sheep SAT. The sheep belong to the shepherd first. The following comes after. The voice comes first.

*When we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads.*

The collect puts it in exactly that order. Hearing. Knowing. Following. Not the other way around.

So here is what I want to leave you with today, and it is not complicated: You are already known. You are already loved. Whatever you walked in here carrying this morning, whatever distance you feel between yourself and God, whatever makes you think you might not quite qualify, The shepherd already knows your name.

He knew it before you sat down. He knew it before you walked in. He knew it in the moments you're least proud of and the moments you've forgotten about entirely.

And here is the thing about following a shepherd. Sometimes you don't. "*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love,*" goes the second line of Come Thou Font. But eventually the shepherd will call your name loudly enough, persistently enough and you end up going where the shepherd goes.

Which, if you read the rest of the gospels, is toward hungry people, sick people, excluded people, people standing on the wrong side of every fence that matters. The shepherd doesn't call us by name so we can stand around feeling individually cozy and spiritual. He calls us by name so we can get moving and do something. Belonging to this flock has a direction.

The invitation of this Sunday is not to become worthy of the shepherd's attention. You've been given that. It is simply to hear the voice that is already calling, and to notice that it is calling you specifically, and to take one step in that direction.

Even sheep can do that.

