

*Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday, 7.v.2005, 10:00 a.m.  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Bregue, Pennsylvania  
Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18  
Holy Communion, LBW - Setting 2*

*J.J.!*

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and Who  
is to come! ✠ Amen.

*"I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own  
know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.  
And I lay down my life for the sheep."*

*- John 10:14,15*

Human and animal kind have lived in every sort of proximity and relationship imaginable down through our relatively short history as a species. In some cases, competition for habitat and survival has marked our relationship, especially with animals in the wild. A few species have invaded our habitat so successfully that now, perhaps thirty thousand years after dogs and cats became members of the family, we think it was our idea in the first place. In some cases, e.g., among the Plains Indians of North America and among most of the ancient and still some modern societies of the Mediterranean and Middle East, one animal in particular has proven so important that life was largely based on what those animals provided in the way of not only food but also shelter, clothing and tools.

For tribal peoples such as the Sioux or the Hebrews, animals such as the bison and the sheep played such a role.

The Sioux were dependent on an animal that was not dependent on them. The great western buffalo seemed to them in fact the embodiment of freedom, of power, of independence, and some traditional Plains Indians still hope that the buffalo's destruction that came with the White settlement was merely apparent, that someday they will return out of the bowels of the earth to sustain life once again in their formerly vast number, their herds once again blackening the Great Plains from Canada to Mexico.

For the Hebrews—and with them the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Arabs, the Greeks and all other ancient shepherding peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean—their life-sustaining animal was a different matter entirely. In no other species is the Biblical injunction in Genesis for humankind to be responsible for the animals so graphically manifest as in the domestic sheep. So different from wild mountain sheep, the sheep that was painstakingly bred over thousands of years to live with nomadic human beings on the high, semi-arid plains and with settled farmers on the watered paddock has been for all of the history recorded in the Bible and down to the present day a *dependent* animal, an animal completely

dependent on either human care or at the mercy of hostile predators. The shepherd's task requires constant vigilance, because anything that can go wrong with a sheep and with a flock of sheep *will* go wrong.

Because Our Lord, hearkening back to His human ancestor, that shepherd boy who was placed in charge of Israel's army and people, describes Himself in these terms, those of us called to the Apostolic ministry of Word and Sacrament, sometimes called by the title 'pastor,' i.e., 'shepherd,' and forgetting that we are *not* the shepherds of God's people but merely the sheep *dogs* of Christ, get it into our heads that we would like to take a crack at the real thing, at caring for a bunch of real sheep that cannot hold meetings or talk back. For such silly persons there are books such as this one, *The Sheep Book. A Handbook for the Modern Shepherd*, written, revised and updated by Ron Parker. It is an interesting and exhaustively conceived book, one full of charts, drawings and photographs. The chapters bear inviting titles such as 'Lambing.' That was the one that caught my eye, and so there I began to browse until I came to the photograph on page 153 in which an athletically built shepherdess is shown swinging a newborn lamb over her head. The caption reads, "Swinging a slow-to-go newborn lamb like this will start it

breathing almost every time.” I certainly hope so. It was at that point that I put the book down. You are welcome to borrow it.

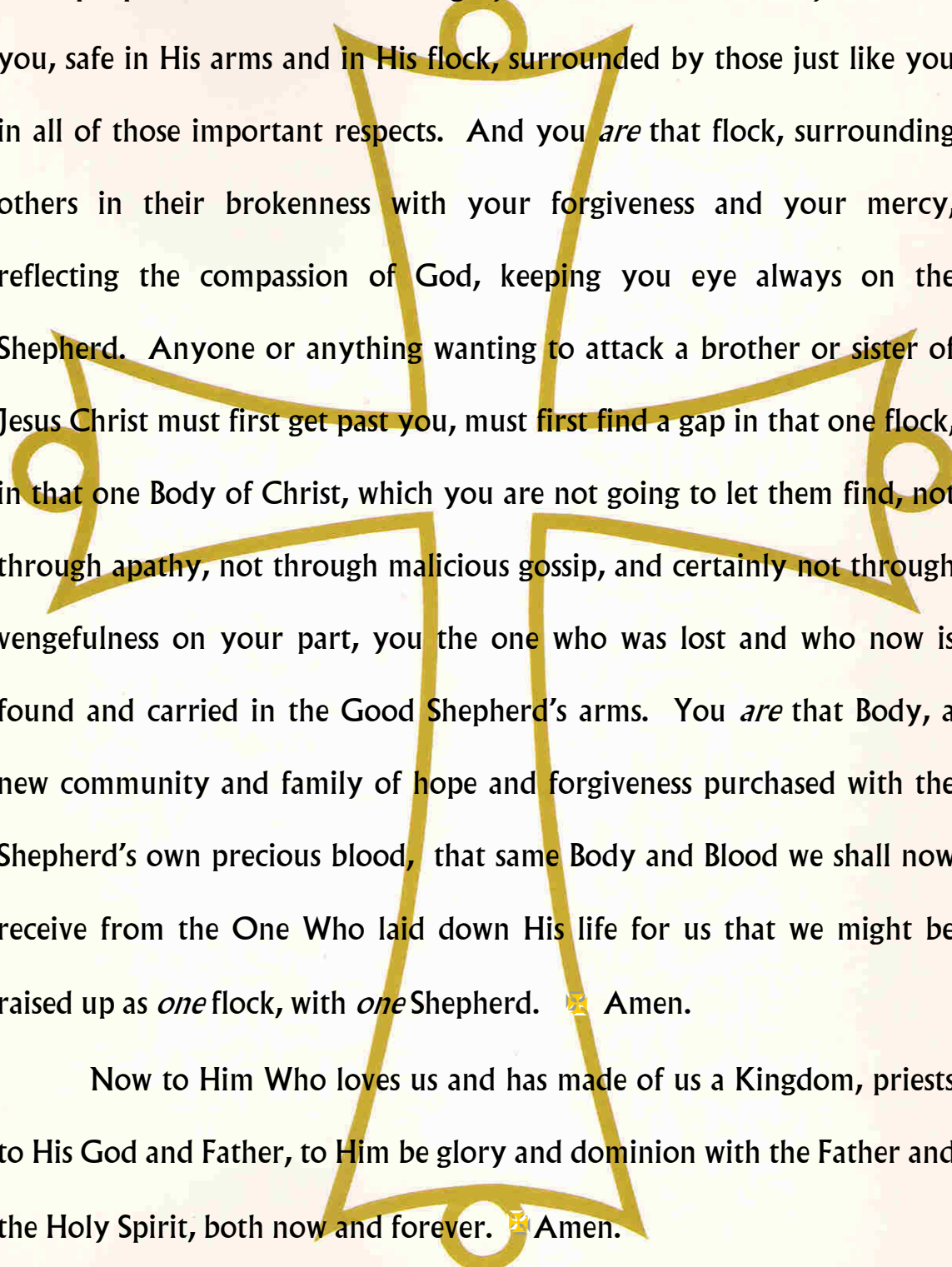
The first real live shepherd I ever saw was not the shepherd near Nordhausen in eastern Germany with the six hundred and twenty sheep and two very busy dogs I have told you about on previous Good Shepherd Sundays. The *first* shepherd I ever saw in the act of shepherding was a man standing quietly in the Emmer Valley, near where I lived, amid scenery that would remind you of the Susquehanna Valley near Selin’s Grove.. There he was at about 9:00 in the morning as my family and I rode quietly by on bicycles, enjoying the beautiful autumn weather, vigilantly, motionlessly watching over his flock with his two trusty German shepherds, and there he was again, in almost the same spot, at about 4:00 in the afternoon, doing the same thing in exactly the same way. Since there was no shelter in sight, and no car either, I suppose he must have herded those sheep from some remote location and that he was not able to rest until he had brought them back whence they came. Now, unless he was some harried businessman from Hamburg who had paid a lot of money to a farmer for a rural vacation that would give him time to think and breath the fresh country air, that seemed and seems to me like a day of hard work without ceasing.

The shepherd whose life and livelihood is completely dependent on sheep shares this earth and this brief span of days—entire *days* of it—with creatures who are completely dependent on their shepherd. A real working flock is the picture of hierarchical cooperation: the shepherd keeps both eyes on the flock; the sheep dogs, where they work in tandem, keep one set of eyes on misbehaving or foolish stragglers and another set of eyes on the ram, who eyes the dog right back. The shepherd ‘lays down,’ sets aside a whole human life for the individual and collective lives of the sheep, i.e., everything else in the shepherd’s life recedes into the background, resistance to inconveniences that would make most of us cringe. Even the shepherd’s fear of pain and death is set aside when the flock or an individual sheep or lamb is under threat of attack. That Emmertal shepherd I saw nearly two decades ago may not have had much to fear from predators, but shepherds in Jesus’ time and place certainly did. Varmints of both the four-legged and two-legged kind were never far away in Roman occupied Galilee, Samaria and Judæa.

Sheep may not be too bright, but they are smart enough to tell a predator from a protector, and to trust their protector, both the two-legged one who is tall enough to see all around and who seems to understand the big picture *and* the dogs who serve the shepherd, those

second-rank shepherds who are content with the fact that the real shepherd whom they too can trust is in charge. You can't see them in the mural over the Main Altar, but they are back there, somewhere, bringing up the rear in this wooly crew of white sheep, black sheep, possibly ill-tempered sheep and one fluffy white lamb whose mother looks on proudly as the Good Shepherd holds it in His arms. Perhaps Jon Boshart, the artist, meant us to understand the little lamb as that one member of the flock who was lost from the ninety-and-nine and is now found, brought back to the sheepfold of the Kingdom of Heaven, as Jesus used that image in the parable. There may be danger off in the distance, ravaging wolves, laughing hyenas or cantankerous old goats, but here, within the sheepfold, surrounding the Shepherd with the weakest, most vulnerable member of the flock in His arms, there is only excitement and joy.

*You* are that little lamb, and *this* is the flock of Christ. Within this sheepfold of Christ the only requirement is that each one here *be* a sheep—or a *sheep dog!* — i.e., keenly, honestly, humbly aware of our dependence on God's mercy in Jesus Christ, *trusting* in Him and *utterly loyal to Him and to the well-being of His flock.* *You* are that lamb, safe in His arms, safe no matter how your sins may accuse you, no matter how



other people or the Evil One through your own conscience may condemn you, safe in His arms and in His flock, surrounded by those just like you in all of those important respects. And you *are* that flock, surrounding others in their brokenness with your forgiveness and your mercy, reflecting the compassion of God, keeping you eye always on the Shepherd. Anyone or anything wanting to attack a brother or sister of Jesus Christ must first get past you, must first find a gap in that one flock, in that one Body of Christ, which you are not going to let them find, not through apathy, not through malicious gossip, and certainly not through vengefulness on your part, you the one who was lost and who now is found and carried in the Good Shepherd's arms. You *are* that Body, a new community and family of hope and forgiveness purchased with the Shepherd's own precious blood, that same Body and Blood we shall now receive from the One Who laid down His life for us that we might be raised up as *one* flock, with *one* Shepherd. ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

**S. D. G.!**