

At one time it seemed that every home had a plaque on the wall called Footprints in the Sand. It goes something like, a man was walking along the Lord on the beach and looking back noticed that there were sometimes two sets of footprints, to which the Lord explained that was when He walked beside him, and then there were occasionally one set of footprints, and the Lord said that is where He carried him. In my favorite version the man also notices a long rut on the ground, which he asks the Lord about, and the Lord said, "yes, my child, that is where I dragged you awhile."

Now today is Good Shepherd Sunday. It is also the feast day of St. George who reminds us that dragon slaying, and martyrdom may also be a part of the Christian life. But on this Second Sunday after Easter the Church looks back to when Our Lord said, I am the Good Shepherd, the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the Sheep and reminds us that even back in the tenth chapter of John the Lord was prophesying His death. And yet, perhaps because we no longer live in an agricultural society, or because Texas would rather keep cattle instead of sheep, when we say the Good Shepherd, we immediately think of Jesus, meek and mild, carrying an adorable lamb over His shoulder. It is not entirely wrong or our fault to think of The Good Shepherd, after all, the oldest image in Christianity is the image of the Good Shepherd. Jesus is presented as a youth, carrying a lamb over His shoulders. And we pray that we are the lamb being carried on the Lord's shoulders.

But despite what these images might provoke in us, from the lamb's perspective it really was not all that comfortable. Jesus tells us a Good Shepherd would leave the flock, leave the ninety-nine sheep to go after the sheep who had wandered off. Remember, sheep are notoriously stupid creatures, and often wander off, in search of greener grass or water. Sheep also have multiple predators, which is why we read of David, who as a shepherd boy protected his flock by fighting off a bear and lion with his bare hands and a slingshot. It was not uncommon for sheep to end up on cliffs, or in mountain caves, or stuck between boulders, thorns, or in thick mud. Remember that Moses took up shepherding for a time and it was a sheep wandering into a mountain cave that led him to the burning bush. For this reason, the shepherd was equipped with a staff, which is traditionally the same kind of staff our bishop carries. One end simply looks like a stick and is obviously for prodding and fighting off multiple predators. The other end is hooked, and is specifically for hooking around the sheep's neck, grabbing a back leg, and dragging them out of whatever situation they have gotten themselves into. Then the sheep would be placed on the shoulders of the shepherd and brought back to the flock. Not at all a comfortable experience for the lamb or the shepherd.

Because sheep are so prone to predators and wandering off to their own peril, shepherding was a full-time vocation. A good shepherd spends nearly every moment of every day and night in the field with their sheep. It is their vocation. The entire life of a shepherd had to be sacrificed to meet the wants and needs of the completely dependent, needy, hungry, foolish, creatures that have put into their keeping. Thankfully, the Good Shepherd is dedicated to His

flock, He is not simply a hireling, or an assistant who has little to gain from risking his life for the sheep when a predator comes stalking. Because He has spent so much time with His sheep, in leading them in and out of green pasture, to water, and to safety, even sleeping between the gate of the fold and the flock, the sheep know him by the very sound of his voice.

The Good Shepherd knows his sheep, He knows their specific needs and wants. He knows their faults and which ones are prone to wander off. He leaves the flock to go after those sheep that are prone to wander off, even if he must risk it all to save the one sheep. And when He finds the sheep He saves it, fighting off predators, freeing it from thorns, rocks, and quicksand, even dragging it to safety. Jesus calling Himself the Good Shepherd, even though it may provoke so many comfortable images for us today, was quite shocking to those gathered around Jesus. Shepherds in Jesus day, even though Moses and David and several of the prophets had been shepherds, were not a part of polite society. Even though shepherding was essential for the Temple Sacrifice and the economy of Israel, Shepherds were seen as the lowest members of society, what we might call hill-billys. Then there is the problem of the learned and sophisticated Pharisees compared to wolves, thieves, hirelings or the most foolish of creatures, sheep. Jesus compares us to sheep too, not just to adorable, picturesque lambs, but to dirty animals, who cannot even survive on their own, who wander off and get themselves into danger because they thought the grass was greener on the other side. Their reaction was anything but pleasant. Jesus the Good Shepherd divided the crowd, the sheep from the goats, *and many of them saith, He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye Him?* But some heard the words of Jesus and believed.

There is one Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who has laid His life down for the sheep, and taken it up again. There is one flock, which includes us all. And this means that we belong to Christ. And as often as we go astray, He will come seeking us, and bring us back to His flock, if only we will let Him. It makes no sense to the modern mind that a shepherd would sacrifice himself for his sheep. But perhaps this is one of the best ways of thinking about the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. And yet, we who are told this morning that there is little difference between us and sheep, are encouraged by St. Paul to imitate the Good Shepherd, and somehow it is possible.

We pray today that we will know the voice of the Good Shepherd, we pray for the grace to hear his voice, to follow His steps, to be shepherded by Him, led in and out of green pasture, beside the still water. We pray for grace that as often as we wander off, or as we watch others wander off from His fold that He will go and seek them, and bring them back, carrying them on His shoulders. We pray for the humility to realize that we are the Lord's sheep, that we rely not on our own selves but on Him. We pray for the grace to be sheep and to be shepherded by the Good Shepherd, until finally we reach His Heavenly Kingdom. Amen.