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Pastor's Column

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"God Is Our Shepherd"

"Jesus Said, 'My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.'"

--John 10:27-30

Sheep are not noted for their intelligence. They have a tendency to wander off, to get caught in the bushes or dragged down into the water. So the shepherd has to be on his guard at all times. And so much does he love his individually named sheep that he will leave the flock for a time to search for a stray.

Psalm 23, "*The Lord, Shepherd and Host*," was obviously written by someone who knew. Perhaps it was King David, himself a shepherd in his youth. The shepherd in the psalm leads his flock to green pastures because sheep, unlike goats, cannot digest drying vegetation. The shepherd finds still waters for his flock because sheep cannot drink at swiftly flowing streams—all too often they are carried off and drowned. The shepherd guides his flock along the "right paths;" in other words, he knows how to avoid the spots where poisonous snakes sun themselves, where boulders are apt to break loose and where marauding animals lurk.

When the sheep are returned to their sheepfold after a day out on the mountain, the shepherd himself becomes the gate to the sheepfold. With his body he blocks the entrance so that only one animal at a time may enter. In this way he can check again for any injuries, and also make sure that he has all his flock.

The shepherd has his name for every sheep under his care, and the sheep respond to his voice. In ancient times, calling one's sheep was often a test of ownership, especially if local authorities suspected the sheep had been stolen.

Finally, when the shepherd calls the sheep out the next morning, they follow him and he leads, unlike other cultures where the shepherd follows the sheep. In Palestine, the terrain is so uncertain and the climate so changeable that the shepherd must go first in order to clear potential hazards out of the way.

In the Shepherd imagery, Jesus also insists on being the gate to the sheepfold. He is emphasizing his role as judge, something we do not often realize. He is the one who either allows a sheep to go in or not. But since the sheep already belong to him, his judging is more a case of forbidding wolves and thieves from entering his kingdom.

The rod and staff serve to keep sheep from straying and sometimes are used as a sort of balustrade when the shepherd has to use hillside paths with steep drops.

The shepherd knows how to pasture the flock, even though packs of enemies—wolves, wild dogs—may be near.

And when he walks among his resting flock, he uses his horn of oil on any scratches or grazes he finds on their heads, where they are especially vulnerable.

As we continue our celebration of the Resurrection in these Great Fifty Days, we are mindful that we are sheep, and the shepherd of our flock is our God who always guides us along the right path. All we need do is listen to God's voice!

F. Mike