

St Thomas and St Thomas of the Air Church
 May 4, 2025
 Easter II
 Good Shepherd Sunday
 rmcneely+

*I am the good shepherd
 I lay down my life for the sheep.*

From the themes of today's Epistle and Gospel
 Today is informally known throughout Christendom
 as "Good Shepherd Sunday".
 Every Church has its own traditions and culture.

Here at St Thomas' Good Shepherd Sunday has taken on a special
 significance.

Not only the propers,
 But the hymns and anthems of our Choir
 Proclaim the day.
 It was by the unselfish gift of one of our members
 On Good Shepherd Sunday several years ago
 That St Thomas' came to celebrate the Day
 In its own special way.
 I'll tell you more about that in a moment.

Shepherds are common and important figures in the Bible:

Abel, the son of Adam and Eve
 Abraham
 Isaac
 Jacob and his 12 sons (the 12 tribes of Israel)
 Moses and Prophets like Amos were shepherds

David, who slew Goliath and was King
 David's 23rd psalm: The Lord is my Shepherd,
 is known by millions
 Rachael, Jacob's wife,

Rebekah, Isaac's wife
 And Zipporah, Moses' wife, were all shepherdesses.

It was to Shepherds that the angel Gabriel first announced the birth
 of Our Savior at Bethlehem.
 and it was the Shepherds that were first to arrive to greet the baby
 Jesus.

So it is against this backdrop
 that Jesus tells us that
 He is the Good Shepherd

and Peter tells us
 we were "as sheep gone astray
 but now are returned unto the Shepherd
 and the guardian of our souls."

What is it?
 What are the character traits of shepherds that
 the Bible,
 Our Lord and St Peter
 Bring to our attention today?

In England
 more than 170 years ago
 there lived a young preacher/priest
 Frederick W. Robertson
 He became a renowned preacher
 clergyman/son of an army commander.
 On Good Shepherd Sunday all those years ago
 He gave a sermon in the church at Oxford
 That dealt with the character of shepherds:

"Beneath the burning skies and the clear starry nights
 Of Palestine

There grows up between the shepherd and his flock
An union of attachment and tenderness.

It is the country,
where at any moment sheep are liable
to be swept away by some mountain torrent,
Or carried off by hill-robbers
Or torn by wolves.

At any moment their protector may have to save them
by personal hazard.

Every hour of the shepherd's life is (at) risk.
Sometimes for the sake of an armful of grass
in the parched summer days,
he must climb precipices almost perpendicular
and stand on a narrow ledge of rock,
where the wild goat will scarcely venture.

Pitiless showers,
driving snows,
long hour of thirst—
all this a shepherd must endure
if the flock is to be kept at all.

And thus there grows up between the shepherd
and the dumb creatures he protects,
a kind of friendship

You love those for whom you risk, and they love you;
therefor it is
that,
not as here where the flock is driven,
the shepherd goes before and the sheep follow.

They follow in perfect trust,
even though
he should be leading them away
from a green pasture,
by a rocky road,

to another pasture they cannot yet see
 Hirelings are shepherds but not good shepherds...
 they are tested by danger...

Now a man is a hireling
 when he does his duty for pay.
 He may do it in his way faithfully.
 The paid shepherd
 would not desert the sheep for a shower
 or a cold night.

But the lion and the bear-
 he is not paid to risk his life against them
 and the sheep are not his,
 so he leaves them to their fate...
 the cause of the sheep is not his cause.”

Father Robertson captured the work and character of the Shepherd
 And gives us a glimpse of what Jesus is telling us this
 morning.

It was several years ago, just after Good Shepherd Sunday
 That I arrived at the Church to find an envelope addressed to
 “Our Good Shepherd” in the parish hall.
 In it was a CD and a note that said simply “Fritz”
 And would I please return the CD after we had seen it.
 In those days the Bible Study Group met on Wednesday evenings
 At the Church.
 And I adopted a custom of “Movie Nights”
 When we watched films every now and then rather than
 Working on scripture.
 It was a fun time with popcorn and theater treats.

Some of you may recall the 16 mm film “Morning Star”
 That was the CD contained in the envelope
 that I found in the Canon Wilder Parish Hall.

It was copy of an Encyclopedia Britannica documentary.

It is a grainy copy of the tv broadcast from the '50s

Filmed in black and white with a hand held camera,

With no recorded sound,

With no sophisticated editing or technological wonders.

It was raw, crude and powerful.

It documented the annual 200 mile trek from The Salt River Valley
near Tempe, Arizona

Up to the White Mountains in the Fort Apache
Reservation.

One man, Rosalio Lucero, one shepherd

Wizened with age, his leathery skin bronzed by the sun,

Walks some 200 miles

Driving 2000 sheep over 52 days.

There is nothing like a good documentary to transport you.

The journey was in the dust of the Arizona high desert summer.

It was under the blistering sun of the day

And the freezing cold of the night,

With only a tarp for shelter.

There were days without water, without food.

Rosalio was constantly on duty.

Even in the dead of night

He arose from sleep to stop the sheep from stampeding away

To find and return the strays to the flock.

With only a rod to ward off predators stalking the flock.

He removed the needles of cactus,

thorns that got into their eyes

and penetrated the skin of the sheep,

That entangled their wool from chest to legs, crippling them.

He treated them for disease.

He kept them on the journey to a greener pasture that they had not seen across the dessert with no trail to guide them.

He endured torrential rain and even snow in the high country.

Rosalio was in constant danger the entire trip.

But despite it all

2000 sheep began the journey

and 2000 sheep completed the journey.

Rosalio died a few years after the film was made.

Oh, the film was loaned to us by the generosity of

Fritz Maytag.

A friend of St Thomas' and now I am proud to say of mine.

We begin to see

The abiding characteristics of shepherds

Are courage,

independence,

self-determination

sacrifice.

And the love that motivates them.

But the cause of Jesus is the sheep.

He is the Good Shepherd.

To Him risk does not even matter.

There is certainty and no question.

He will give His life for the sheep.

He gave His life for the sheep,

knowingly

and voluntarily,

and lovingly.

He submitted to the torture of the cross

to defeat the evil, and sin,

to defeat death,

and to give his sheep the chance for everlasting life.

There is perhaps nowhere else in scripture
where we see better evidence
of Jesus' great mission to save mankind than right here.
The disciples would not know for months
what Jesus was talking about when he told them:
"I lay down my life for the sheep".
They could not know the power
and the depth of His love
that was behind His statement.

Now, there is irony in this.

Jesus who, at His baptism,
at the moment of the beginning of his earthly ministry,
is called out as the Lamb of God, by John the Baptist
is later the Good Shepherd of the lambs
and finally is Himself the sacrifice.
At the very moment that the lambs were being sacrificed
For the Passover meal in Jerusalem
so Jesus was sacrificed on the Cross.

Many of the sheep born near Bethlehem were bred to be sacrificed
in the temple at Jerusalem.
So Jesus was born in Bethlehem and sacrificed at Jerusalem.

The Shepherd sacrifices himself to save the sheep.
Here Jesus sacrifices Himself to save us from our sins.

Now, as you know, I have never had much to do with sheep in my life

but my good wife has;

 hundreds of thousands of them.

 She grew up on a sheep and cattle station in NZ.

She will tell you that sheep are

 smelly,

 dirty,

 completely helpless

(when rain soaked fall over, left unattended they will die),

but most of all she will tell you

 sheep are fundamentally stupid animals.

Forget everything Hollywood ever told you about sheep they are fundamentally stupid.

But, the point is not to denigrate sheep

 But that sheep are completely reliant upon their shepherds
 for everything,

 even their very lives and existence.

While it is not particularly complimentary of our species;

 the inspired word of God in Holy Scripture

 equates us with sheep in order to complete the metaphor,

 it may be an accurate comparison.

We too are completely reliant upon our Shepherd

 for our lives

 and our immortal souls

 and for the life to come.

And I have to admit that we too can be

 as helpless,

 forgetful and stupid

 and as stubborn as sheep.

Like sheep we are vulnerable:

Without their shepherd
sheep are vulnerable to the attack of wolves,

Like the sheep, without our Shepherd
we too are vulnerable to the attack of the evil
that lurks in our lives.

The evil, like the wolves,
can tear apart our souls and destroy us.
We need a shepherd for protection.
And like the wolves, our sins can also tear apart our souls.
We need a Shepherd to protect us from ourselves and to
forgive our sins.

Like sheep we are carried off by the robbers of our souls
and we need a Shepherd to return us to the fold.

Like sheep, we can be stampeded scattered,
isolated from each other and lost.

We need a Shepherd to quell the panic,
to find us when we are lost
and to bring us home
to the protection of His church.

Like sheep, we can recognize the storms in our lives
but sometimes cannot come up with what to do about them.
We need a shepherd to guide us back to safety.

Like the rain soaked sheep,
the troubles of our lives can knock us down.
Without a shepherd, we cannot get up
and will die a spiritual death.

We have that Shepherd . . . the good Shepherd.

Are we prepared to be devoted members of His flock?
Are we prepared to hear His voice
 To follow where He leads,
 even over a rocky road to a pasture we have not yet seen?

St Peter closed today's Epistle with this:
I think I will too:

For ye were as sheep gone astray
But are now returned unto the Shepherd
And Bishop of your souls.

