

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA**

April 26, 2026 – FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*We Really Need Jesus, our Shepherd!*”\*

Acts 2:42-47	(The Apostles devoted themselves to prayer & the breaking of bread)
Psalm 23	(The Lord is our Shepherd)
1 Peter 2:19-25	(We were going astray like lost sheep, but by Christ's wounds we are healed)
St. John 10:1-10	(Jesus tells the parable of the Good Shepherd—whom He is)

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Jesus said: “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” These words of Our Lord refer to the Paschal Mystery which we celebrate at Easter. So it is appropriate that this Fourth Sunday of Easter be celebrated as “Good Shepherd Sunday.”

The representation of the good shepherd is one of the most endearing, most enduring, and most primitive images. In ancient Egyptian manuscripts, the king is often depicted as a shepherd. And, in Ezekiel 34:11-16, we read: “... this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. . . . I will tend them in a good pasture . . . and have them lie down . . . I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak . . . I will shepherd the flock with justice.” The image of the shepherd also appears in what is just about everyone’s favorite Psalm—number 23—“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

While the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm portrays shepherding as an honorable profession, most ancient Israelites despised keepers of sheep as lower-class and ritually unclean. It is Jesus who redeems this role, because He knows the close relationship between the shepherd and his sheep. The variability of good pastures imposes upon the sheep-herder a nomadic life, so that he must travel with his flock from one region to another as the seasons change.

This creates an intimate bond between the shepherd and his sheep. And in the course of their life together, the shepherd cares for his sheep, calls them by name, leads them to fertile pastures and clean water, finds shelter for them in bad weather, defends them against bandits and wolves, and is willing to lay down his life for them. Because of this, the sheep have great confidence in their shepherd. They recognize his voice, obey his commands, and follow wherever he leads them.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd, the One fulfilling God’s promise to His people. Christ’s mission is to the lost sheep of Israel, as well as to those who are not of that flock. He is so eager to save even one individual lost sheep, He will leave the ninety-nine in the pen and go in search of a single stray. Even more, as the Good Shepherd, He will lay down his life for his sheep by going to the Cross in our place.

Jesus also says “I am the gate for the sheep.” This image comes from the custom in Jesus’ time, when, after the shepherd penned the sheep in for the night, he would lay down in front of the entrance to block the doorway against any animal or person seeking to harm the flock. He also protected them with his shepherd’s crook, used to pull the sheep back from danger and keep them on the right path. In the Church, we see a stylized version of the shepherd’s crook in the crosier carried by all Bishops. The symbol of the shepherd is also present on the parish level, for the word *Pastor* means “shepherd” in Latin.

In Matthew 25, Jesus is portrayed as the discerning Shepherd who, on the Day of Judgment, will judge between the sheep and the goats. In the ancient Near East, sheep and goats were frequently herded together—in fact, I’ve seen this in farms I pass when driving to church. Sheep are docile, gentle creatures, whereas goats tend to be unruly and rambunctious and can easily upset the sheep.

Because they may not feed or rest well together, the ancient Israelite shepherds tended to separate the animals for grazing and for sleeping at night. In a similar way the Lord Jesus Christ will separate believers from unbelievers when He returns to establish His Kingdom on Earth.

The Bible says in Matthew, Chapter 25 that He will place the believing, obedient sheep on His right, the place of favor and blessing. But the unbelieving, rebellious goats He will put on His left, the place of disfavor and rejection.

The people who heard Jesus say that He is the Good Shepherd may have been greatly moved by that tender image, but for us, shepherds and sheep are not very common or relevant in our high tech, computerized world. And we don't like to think of ourselves as dumb, submissive animals. After all, we're sophisticated human beings, with an intellect and a free will. We can go wherever we choose, and do whatever we want.

But if we truly desire to understand the Scriptures and what it means to have a real relationship with God, we need to understand why Jesus uses this image of the Shepherd and His sheep. First, just possibly, we are more like sheep than we care to admit. Like them, we are often oblivious to everything except the little plot of earth that surrounds us here and now. And like sheep, we may not be aware of the ravenous wolves that surround us in this God-forsaken culture in which we live,<sup>1</sup> to say nothing of the wolves that come to us in sheep's clothing. And just like sheep, we always think the grass is greener on the other side, so we stray from the Shepherd in search of it.

Sheep also cannot defend themselves from predators. Many animals, such as skunks or blowfish, have a defense system, but sheep do not. We, as believers cannot protect ourselves from Satan, the evil one, except by the power of God as mediated through the Good Shepherd. Sheep cannot find food and water for themselves. They depend upon the shepherd to lead them to water and green pastures, as we read in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. We, as believers, depend upon the Lord for our spiritual nourishment, as well as for our daily physical needs. Shepherdless sheep can overgraze a pasture by eating the grass down to the dirt so that it can't grow back. If that's the pasture they're familiar with, they won't move on to another even when it's barren—unless the shepherd herds them. Sheep can easily starve to death without a shepherd!

Given their frailties, how pitiful shepherdless sheep are! Shepherdless sheep become easy prey for wolves, coyotes, and other predators. They can't outrun them. They can't outfight them. And what wolf would be scared off by a little bleating: "Baaa"? Without a shepherd, sheep are left bloodied and dead. This is why the shepherd's heart of our Lord Jesus Christ goes out to each and every one of us. For without Him, we are shepherdless sheep. Without Him, we are easy prey for that ravenous wolf named Satan, and all the ways he disguises himself. That predator's sharp teeth can tear us to shreds with his lies, deceptions, temptations, and misdirection

Here's another unsavory fact about sheep: They cannot clean themselves. Some animals, such as cats, can do that, but not sheep. Likewise, we as flawed human beings are unable to clean ourselves from the filth of sin. We need Jesus, our Shepherd, to wash us in the waters of Baptism and cleanse us by His sacred blood. A shepherdless sheep can even die from being mired in its own filth. You see, sheep need their rear-ends sheared and cleansed regularly, otherwise their dung sticks to the wool. Blowflies will lay eggs in that manure, and within a day the maggots start burrowing into the sheep's skin which they begin eating. Then the flies produce ammonia, poisoning the sheep.<sup>2</sup> A fly-struck sheep is a sickening sight.

Sheep are not very intelligent. As believers, neither are we, when it comes to the things of God. That's why our salvation, our eternal security, depends entirely upon the work of Our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Moreover, He gives us the Holy Spirit to make the wisdom of God accessible to our understanding.

We *need* our Shepherd! Without Him, we would spiritually starve to death and be unable to find the lush pastures that restore our soul. Like the dusty dirt of overgrazed land, the empty promises and senseless diversions of this world cannot bring us true nourishment. We *need* our Shepherd! Without Him, the filth of our own sin clings to us, breeding the maggots of guilt that burrow deep into our conscience and begin to poison our souls.

We *need* our Shepherd! By His sacrificial death and glorious rising from the dead, Christ has cut away the filth in which our souls were mired. Having cleansed our souls, His tender voice assures us: “I, your Shepherd, have taken away all your sins and washed you clean in my own blood. I laid down my life for you, my sheep. You are fully forgiven. Be of good cheer.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, St. John’s flock: Listen to His voice, for only Christ can bring this good news. For you, He faced down Satan, that prowling lion. And He continues to protect you from the Adversary’s wiles and deceptions. Jesus’ voice calls to each of us: “Fear not, little lamb, only follow Me, because I, your Shepherd, have taken up My life again in victory. Only listen to My voice, for My word of Truth will protect you.”<sup>4</sup>

His trustworthy voice is the same one that feeds and nourishes our souls. Jesus said: “My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me” (John 10:27). It is only when we take time to turn off our TV’s, cell phones, and computers, put everything else on the back burner, and are quiet and still before the Lord that we can we hear the voice of our Good Shepherd. And what a great blessing it is to listen to the voice of Jesus, and to follow Him with joy and confidence wherever He may lead us. *Amen.*

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\* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, “It’s OK to be Sheep-ish,” 11 May 2014, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Rodney Kissinger, “The Good Shepherd,” © 2006-2013, [FRKSJ.org](http://www.frksj.org/homily_the_good_shepherd.htm) <[http://www.frksj.org/homily\\_the\\_good\\_shepherd.htm](http://www.frksj.org/homily_the_good_shepherd.htm)> 9 May 2014. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Effects on Sheep,’ *Lucilia cuprina*, 6 April 2026, [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucilia_cuprina) <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucilia\\_cuprina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucilia_cuprina)> 18 April 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Adapt. Gregg Bitter, “Shepherdless Sheep,” 2 August 2009, [SermonCentral.com](https://sermoncentral.com) <<https://sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/73162/shepherdless-sheep-by-gregg-bitter>> 18 April 2026.

<sup>4</sup> Bitter, *op. cit.*