

## THE GOOD SHEPHERD LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE FOR THE SHEEP

The psalm writer (David?) tells us (Psalm 23) that *The Lord is my shepherd*", and (Psalm 100) *The LORD himself is God; \* he himself has made us, and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture*".

Despite the wealth of material celebrating shepherds, shepherding was a trade that was cursed by the Rabbis. The problem was that shepherds were suspected of grazing the sheep on land that did not belong to them. They were thieves who used other peoples' grazing lands. For most of us who are not so closely associated with livestock, it may be hard to see the extent of the fear of shepherds. One has only to think back upon the legendary Sheep and Cattle Wars of the late 19th century in a time of the open range. The legend was that sheep would crop the graze so close to the ground that cattle would not be able to eat. One Dakota sheep rancher reported that some 1000 of his sheep died in one day thanks to the water poisoning done by the cattle men. There were gun fights and deaths over grazing lands.

Spend a few minutes considering the import of our Lord's words, (1) **I AM.** (*In Hebrew I Am is the Hebrew name for God* ) (2) **I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.**

### **Easter Season Blessing**

May almighty God, who has redeemed us and made us his children through the resurrection of his Son our Lord, bestow upon you the riches of his blessing. **AMEN.**

May God, who through the water of baptism has raised us from sin into newness of life, make you holy and worthy to be united with Christ for ever. **AMEN.**

May God, who has brought us out of bondage to sin into true and lasting freedom in the Redeemer, bring you to your eternal inheritance. **AMEN.**

And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you for ever. **AMEN.**

**Please prepare Saint John 15:1-8 for next Sunday.**

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Jesus

### **the Good Shepherd** The Catacombs of St. Callixtus, Rome

W.F. Volbach, *Early Christian Art*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), page 310.

This fresco of the Good Shepherd is painted on the ceiling of the Vault of Lucina in the Catacomb of Callixtus in Rome. The construction of the vault itself has been dated to the second half of the 2nd century, but the use of the red and green lines to divide the space has suggested the first half or middle of the 3rd century for this fresco. The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd was an especially popular motif in the early Christian centuries. It was based in

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several biblical passages, including the 23rd Psalm and sayings of Jesus, and is also an adaptation of a popular pagan image.

### The Image of the Good Shepherd



Jesus the Good Shepherd

Graco/Roman Museum, Alexandria, Egypt, c. 200

We expect the most typical symbol of Jesus to be the cross, especially the realistic crucifix or the *Cristus Rex*, the image of Christ the King reigning in glory from his cross. An image of crucifixion was repugnant to the people of the early church when the cross was all too well known as the common means of Roman execution. The early church instead used the symbol of the Good Shepherd. The symbol was likely based on a pagan statuary form, probably statues of Hermes.<sup>1</sup> who was always

<sup>1</sup> Hermes was the Olympian God of almost everything: animal husbandry, roads, travel, hospitality, heralds, diplomacy, trade, thievery, language, writing, persuasion, cunning wiles, athletic contests, gymnasiums, astronomy, and astrology.

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depicted as a virile youth. Now adult sheep weigh about 70 pounds. In the Christian version the sheep on Jesus' shoulders is half as large as an ox, (see page 2) yet Jesus carries the weight so easily that, in some surviving versions, he is smiling broadly. That message should not be lost upon us.

### Today's Gospel Saint John 10:11-16

✠ JESUS SAID, "**I AM** THE GOOD SHEPHERD. THE GOOD SHEPHERD lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. **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. **I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.** [© NRSV]

### The (Accursed) Shepherds

Scripture is filled with events in the lives of shepherds:

Young Moses flees Egypt and marries the priest of Midian's daughter. He gets a job keeping his father-in-law's sheep. Moses hears God speak his Name, **I AM**, and his commands from the burning bush. Moses returns to Egypt and gives Pharaoh God's command, "Let my people go!"

Jacob's foreign father-in-law agrees to give Jacob all his speckled or spotted sheep. Jacob's magic charms "dapple" most of the flocks' coats. He returns to Palestine as a rich herdsman.

Samuel wants to remove Saul and find a better king for Israel. He examines Jesse's eleven sons but finds none to be suitable. He

asks is there not another son? David, the youngest, is called from the flock and Samuel anoints him as Israel's king.