

"Stupid Sheep!"

Good Shepherd Sunday! It's always a favorite. We are familiar with The Lord as our Shepherd. The 23rd Psalm - The Lord is my Shepherd - is probably the most popular of all the Psalms. In the Gospel of John Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd" and "The Shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep." Isaiah 40:11. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; Psalm 100 says, "Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his ; we are his people, the *sheep* of his pasture.

Isn't that nice! Jesus is the Good Shepherd and we are the Sheep. Now I don't know where you grew up, but I grew up in Philadelphia in Kensington. We didn't have Sheep in Kensington. I didn't know anything about Sheep except that their wool was kinda fluffy. So I thought it was fine for me to be part of the Sheep and Jesus could be the Good Shepherd. Until I learned a bit more about sheep. Let me read you a list of the Characteristics of Sheep

1. timid, fearful, easily panicked
2. dumb stupid, gullible
3. very vulnerable to - fear, frustration, pests & hunger
4. easily influenced by a leader, if one walks over a cliff the rest will follow.
5. stampede easily, vulnerable to mob psychology
6. little or no means of self-defense; they can only run
7. easily killed by enemies
8. jealous, competitive for dominance
9. constantly need fresh water, fresh pasture
10. have very little discernment in choosing food or water
11. perverse, stubborn - will insist on their own way ,
even eating poisonous plants or drinking dirty water
12. flipped over on their back they are unable to right themselves. They will die of starvation if not turned over by shepherd; totally helpless
13. frequently look for easy places to rest
14. don't like to be sheared, cleaned
15. too much wool can cause sheep to be easily flipped
16. creatures of habit; get into "ruts"
17. need the most care of all livestock
18. totally dependent of shepherd for every need

Hmmm..... This makes a difference. Now I'm not sure I like being referred to as a Sheep.

Isn't God being a bit hard on us? Dumb, stupid, gullible? Are we really like that? Easily Panicked? I remember once when someone started a rumor -only a rumor, that there was going to be a shortage of Toilet Paper. Grocery Stores couldn't keep the shelves stocked. People were hoarding Toilet Paper. Yep! They Panicked. Are we really Easily Influenced like Sheep.

Well, when one person is willing to camp outside a store to get the latest fad or gadget simply because someone else might get in line first? Yep, we are easily influenced. Easily fall into Mob Psychology? I still remember the 1st time the Flyers won the Stanley Cup. People were overturning cars and setting them on fire. Why? Simply because everyone else seemed to be doing it. Yep - easily influenced by Mob Psychology. Jealous, Competitive for dominance! Do I really need to give examples of climbing the corporate ladder or how we react if we think someone else is getting a little more than we are? And what about sheep having very little discernment in choosing food or water? That's not us, is it? We are constantly being told we are the unhealthiest generation of eaters in history. Too much salt - too much sugar - too much fat! But I just heard how one of the most popular Fast-Food chains had their stock got up 25% in the last quarter. Okay! Sheep may be cute, but they are also stupid!

I can't help but think of one of the Choruses of The Messiah that quotes Isaiah 53 - "All we like Sheep have gone Astray and turned to his own way!" For 10 pages the chorus sings this phrase over and over and over wandering all over the place like Stupid Sheep with no direction. Face it, we don't want to be Stupid, but sometimes we do act like sheep. We go astray. We simply look for the greener grass in the *other* pasture, whether it be with our relationships, our jobs, our possessions. Like Sheep, we can be easily led astray.

Today is Nursery School Sunday. When it comes to our Children, we need to be the Shepherds. Tell a little child to not open the cabinet door and what are they going to do? Okay, they may wait until you're not around, but they are going to open that door. We tell them not to play with Matches. We tell them to stay out of the street. We say no to more candy, more cookies, more junk. We tell them they can't stay up late. We tell them they can't stay home from school. It seems as their shepherds, like we are often telling them no. Why? Because we know we have to say no in order to keep them safe. We want them to be able to make good choices in picking appropriate foods. We don't want them to simply go along with the crowd.

We don't want them to be simply influenced. Basically, we don't want our children to be Stupid when it comes to making the right choices in life.

I recently read a story where one fine day four people were flying in a small, four-passenger plane: a pilot, a minister, and two teenagers, one of whom had just won an award for being the "Smartest Teenager in the World." As they were flying along, the pilot turned to the three passengers and said, "I've got some bad news, and I've got some worse news. The bad news is, we're out of gas. The plane's going down and we're gonna crash. The worse news is, I only have three parachutes on board. This meant, of course, that someone would have to go down with the plane. The pilot continued. "I have a wife and three children at home. I have many responsibilities. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to take one of the parachutes." With that, he grabbed one of the chutes and jumped out of the plane. The Smartest Teenager in the World was next to speak. "I'm the Smartest Teenager in the

World," he said. "I might be the one who comes up with a cure for cancer or AIDS or solves the world's economic problems. Everyone is counting on me!" **The Smartest Teenager in the World** grabbed the second parachute and **jumped**. The minister then spoke up and said, "Son, you take the last parachute. I've made my peace with God, and I'm willing to go down with the plane. Now take the last parachute and go." "Relax, reverend," said the other teenager. "The Smartest Teenager in the World just jumped out of the plane with my knapsack."

A lot of Teenagers - in fact a lot of people in general are like that "Smartest Teenager in the World." They already know it all. They don't need any guidance. And ultimately, they may end up the same way as that teenager who jumped out and had to face death with nothing more than a knapsack. Our Good Shepherd guides us through life in a way we can avoid the dangers and pitfalls that come our way. But we need to be willing to follow our Shepherd.

When I do Funerals and read the 23rd Psalm, I often tell the story of the first impression I had of Shepherds. My father liked to watch the old Westerns on T.V. You had the Cattle Ranchers, and the sheep herders. The sheep herders would be on their horses and use the sheep dogs to drive the flock forward. That's how they herded sheep. But during my senior year at seminary I did an Independent study in Israel. There they still shepherd flocks the way they did in Jesus' time. The Shepherd is out in front making sure it's a safe path to follow, and the sheep are behind following the Shepherd. Ladies and Gentlemen, the Lord is *our* Shepherd. He leads us, he does not force us to follow. The only really stupid sheep are the ones who wander off and refuse to follow the shepherd. What happens to those sheep? Our Gospel lesson tells us that Jesus even goes after them. Even when we are like Stupid Sheep - thinking we don't need a shepherd - or that the grass is greener in the other pasture - or we don't eat right, treat the other sheep mean - just want to be lazy and find a place to rest, get jealous when other sheep have something we don't - even THEN the Good Shepherd comes after us, is patient with us, forgives us, and brings us back into the fold.

And what happens when we keep wandering away and God is saddened by all of our sinfulness? I think of that last page of the Chorus from The Messiah. "All we like Sheep have gone Astray and turned to his own way" - and the last page says *"And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."*

In many ways we are Stupid Sheep. We keep Sinning, but our Shepherd is there to take the punishment for our sins. Why? Because the Good Shepherd would lay down his life for his Sheep. Our Good Shepherd has laid down his life for us. And when we wander off from this life, into the Valley of the shadow of death, our Good Shepherd will come after us, reassure us of the promise of Eternal Life, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen