

**Sermon Notes:** April 21, 2024  
**Focus:** Good Shepherd Sunday  
**Lectionary:** Easter 4B readings

*Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd.  
The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

I want to do a quick overview of the idea of shepherds since the fourth Sunday of Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday. The Bible is full of shepherd imagery. The Episcopal Church is also full of shepherd imagery especially with the office of the bishop.

### **Ancient Shepherds**

#### ***In the Ancient Near East***

*Geographical Context:* In the ancient Near East (modern-day Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Turkey), almost everyone was farmers and ranchers, especially of sheep and goats.

*Social Role:* Shepherds were not just livestock caretakers; they also played a role in community life. Their community valued their expertise in managing flocks so much that they often served as guides and mediators in disputes.

*Literary References:* Sumerian epics and Mesopotamian law codes frequently mention shepherds, so it is not just the Bible.

#### ***The Shepherd-King***

*David's Background:* Before becoming king, David was a shepherd in Bethlehem. These humble beginnings shaped his character and leadership style.

*David in the Bible:* The books of Samuel, Chronicles, and Psalms provide accounts of David's life as a shepherd and his rise to becoming Israel's king.

#### ***The Prophets and Shepherds***

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel frequently used the metaphor of shepherds to describe Israel's leaders. They praised righteous shepherds who cared for the people and condemned corrupt shepherds who exploited them. This was true whether the economy was good or bad.

### **Good Shepherd Jesus**

#### ***The Selfless Shepherd***

*The Gospel of John:* The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd reflects his selfless devotion and willingness to lay down his life for us.

*Early Christian Interpretations:* Early Christian communities embraced Jesus' teachings on shepherding as a model for leadership and discipleship. Early Church fathers like Augustine emphasized the importance of humility, service, and sacrificial love.

### ***Shepherd-King Jesus***

*Davidic Legacy:* Jesus' claim to be the Good Shepherd resonated deeply with Jewish audiences familiar with the Davidic lineage and messianic expectations. By identifying himself as the Shepherd-King, Jesus affirmed his role as the promised Messiah who would restore Israel and establish God's kingdom.

*Cultural and Religious Context:* In 1st century Judea, the shepherd was intertwined with national identity, religious symbolism, and eschatological hopes. Jesus' teachings on shepherding carried profound political, religious, and spiritual implications.

### ***The Universal Shepherd***

*Everybody:* Jesus wanted to find "other sheep that are not of this fold," and I see that as a call for salvation transcending ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries.

*Historical and Cultural Impact:* Jesus' universalistic approach challenged prevailing ethnocentric and exclusivist views of his time. His teachings on the Good Shepherd paved the way for the early expansion of Christianity beyond Jewish communities, embracing Gentiles and fostering a global faith community.

## **The Episcopal Church**

You probably cannot count the number of Episcopal churches called Good Shepherd. You probably cannot count the number of times you have seen stained glass imagery of the good Shepherd. You may not know the explicit connection between a bishop and shepherd.

### ***The bishop's staff***

The bishop's staff is a shepherd's staff. The shepherd's staff was heavy. Heavy enough to injure a sheep trying to run away when swung correctly. The crook of the staff was meant to grab the sheep around their neck to bring them back. When you see stained glass images of Jesus carrying a sheep on his back, he was carrying injured sheep home.

I hope you found this list of tidbits interesting, especially on Good Shepherd Sunday.

**Todd**