

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from The Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, amen.

For me, the jury is still out. I can't decide if sheep are the dumbest animals ever or among the smartest. I know their reputation. Sheep are supposed to be so stupid that if one heads for a cliff and takes the long first step the rest are sure to follow. Sheep get lost if left on their own for too long. Sheep get tangled up in the thickets and must be rescued. Sheep are too dumb to go into the barn when it's raining. On the other hand, a 2001 scientific study found they can recognize and remember at least 50 individual faces for more than two years. That's longer than many humans. The same study also showed sheep can recognize facial expressions and prefer smiles over frowns. Who doesn't?

I can't personally speak for the intelligence of sheep, but I know alpacas. Alpaca intelligence may not rank at the top of the animal kingdom, but they are at the top when it comes to stubbornness. We were supposed to get them sheared back in April. The head shearer called and texted me that they would be arriving the next day and reminded me to round them up and have them in the barn because the forecast was for rain the next day. So, the evening before, Trevor and I did our best to round them up. I tell you this, if sheep are the dumbest animals, then alpacas are the most stubborn. We tried everything until about 10:00 pm and couldn't get them into the barn. It's hard to round up only seven alpacas when

they have all 11 acres to run away. I even got up at 3:00 am and went out to the barn to see if they had gone in for the night. No such luck. All seven were still out front in the pasture near the house and the road.

When I got up the next morning, PJ had lured six of the seven into a small area we fenced off behind the barn. Unfortunately, by the time I got out to help her catch that last straggler the other six had knocked down the make-shift gate and escaped. Starting all over again I tried to round them up, even using our newest farming tool, a minibike to chase them down across the pasture. All this did was make them even more anxious and more determined not to be corralled and got me extremely irritated. The longer we tried to catch them the harder the rain fell. Finally, in frustration I called the shearer and conceded we could not get the alpacas barned up and by this time they and we were soaking wet from the rain. You can't shear them if they're wet because the fiber will become moldy and unusable. We'll reschedule the shearing for later in June when, hopefully we'll have better luck getting them to cooperate...

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on the Fourth Sunday after Easter we read the 23rd Psalm and the other readings and images for this day all relate in one way or another to sheep and our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel, by the time we get to today's reading, Jesus has already declared himself to be The Good Shepherd who lays down his life for His sheep. I

read a story about a sheep rancher who had lost a good portion of his herd and also his shepherding dog. He replaced the lost sheep with new baby lambs and his son began feeding them willow leaves from his hand. Apparently, willow leaves to sheep are the equivalent of giving candy to a toddler. From that time on the rancher's son was like the pied piper to the flock. For years afterward and without a single willow leaf up to 1000 sheep simply followed him wherever he went. They knew their shepherd and followed.

If only it were that easy with people. Some Church experts say Jesus used the example of sheep on purpose because of our human instinct to follow the herd. Others say it's because humans have about as much sense as a herd of sheep. We *do* tend to follow the leader in most cases, but our human weaknesses and failings also tend to get us into trouble when left untended. I've also heard sheep are at least as stubborn as alpacas. Like stubborn sheep or alpacas, we humans can dig our feet in when we don't get our way... I can't speak for anyone else but myself, but I know I can get pretty stubborn when the issue is something I strongly believe in. I'm almost certainly I'm not alone in this. All you have to do is look at any news program these days to see how entrenched folks are on either side of the political aisle. There's a lot of talking about the issues, but almost no listening. If we've become hard of hearing when it comes to our politics, we've also become hard of hearing when it comes to listening for the voice of our Good Shepherd. As

in our politics, we've already made up our minds where we stand on theological issues as well and no amount of facts can change our minds. Our minds are set like cement.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is at the festival of dedication, which is known today as Hanukkah. This is the day when the Jews celebrate the Maccabee family's victory over foreign Gentile invaders during the time period between the Old and the New Testaments. The Maccabees had given their lives in defense of the nation and were fiercely devoted to God and the Jerusalem temple, doing everything in their power to preserve their people. Jesus was about to do the same thing, but on an even greater scale and for an even greater flock that would include bringing in Gentiles, who were not yet part of the "fold". He's already told the people he is The Good Shepherd just a few verses before our reading from this morning's Gospel. Now the Jewish leaders want Jesus to plainly tell them if he's the Messiah. You can almost hear the frustration in Jesus' voice when He says, "I have told you, and you do not believe..." The reason the Jewish leaders didn't see it was because they didn't belong to Jesus' flock — they didn't recognize his voice, his manner, his care, or his leadership. Jesus came teaching and preaching what to the Jewish leaders seemed like a brand new teaching. They hadn't heard the things Jesus commanded and taught before. They are asking in effect, "Why do you say we have to do these things you teach, when we've always done it our

way before? If we follow your way our faith might be challenged, and it won't be the same ever again. What makes your teaching so right and our ways so wrong?"

The Jewish leaders thought they were smarter and knew God's word better than the actual Word of God who was standing right in front of them! Were they smarter than God Himself? They certainly thought so... Perhaps they weren't as smart as they thought they were... Maybe they were just as stubborn as my alpacas and simply refuse to follow the one trying to get them to come into the shelter of the barn and get out of the rain...

I would be remiss if I didn't recognize this day is also the day we honor our Mother's and the status of motherhood. In many ways' motherhood is like being a shepherd. You keep the flock together and gather them back into the barn for meals and to safety and security for the night. You love and care for your flock and every good mother would lay down her life for her children. Also, in so many ways children act like sheep. It just might be possible that motherhood is just as good an image as the Good Shepherd for Jesus... That's for another day and another sermon...

For today, may we be a people seeking the voice of our Good Shepherd. May we recognize His voice when He calls our names. O God, when we hear the voice of our Shepherd calling, free us from our own false intelligence, our

stupidity, our stubbornness, or anything else that causes us to turn and run in the opposite direction. May those who hear our Master's voice and have decided to follow, make this place, this congregation, a place and a people of welcome, where all the sheep of Jesus' flock can find comfort, safety and best of all, eternal life.

Amen