

'I will lay down my life for the sheep.'

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Once upon a time, there was a young woman by the name of Laura Bell—not your typical, college graduate. After graduation, Laura took a job as a shepherd in Wyoming. Some of her friends thought she was crazy. **But**, and there's that proverbial **BUT** in life, already—our dear Laura wanted a challenge and, for sure, our dear Laura got one!

She worked 14 hours a day, 7 days a week. Her days began at dawn and they ended at sunset. All this time, she was completely alone...except for her dog, her horse, and 2,000 head of sheep—none were very good conversationalists!

Once a week, someone rode out across the hills to bring her food, mail, and rifle shells.

Laura's job consisted in keeping the sheep together, moving them about for food and water, and protecting them from wild animals. She said:

"When you're out here all alone, there's no one to correct your mistakes. So, you keep doubly alert for dangers, like rattlesnakes; and you don't do dumb or risky things with your horse."

Laura said one of her joys was the weather. It was, also, one of her biggest headaches. The weather determined how the sheep were going to behave and what her day would be like.

One morning, a group of sheep decided to break away. She spent the rest of the day tracking them down. Just when she found them, a thunderstorm drenched her and the flock. She spent that night shivering in a wad of soggy blankets.

The story of Laura Bell gives us an insight into just how hard the job of a modern shepherd can be. Ancient shepherds, about whom I just read to you from St. John, had to work even harder, as they had no horse, dog, or rifle to help them. All they had was themselves ...and great danger.

For example: The 1st Book of Samuel tells how young David volunteers to fight the Philistine giant, Goliath. The king refuses David's request, saying he is too young. David responds:

"Your majesty, I take care of my father's sheep. Any time a lion or a bear carries off a lamb, I go after it, attack it, and rescue the lamb. And if the bear or lion turns on me, I grab it by the throat and beat it to death. I have killed lions and bears and will do the same to this heathen Philistine."

1 Sam. 17:34-36

We all know how the story turned out. David defeated Goliath with a slingshot, the closest thing to a rifle for ancient shepherds. Yet, the danger to ancient shepherds' life came, not just from wild animals, but also from outlaws and rustlers.

Once upon a time, a young shepherd was tending his flock near Mt. Tabor. Suddenly, 3 Bedouin rustlers appeared. The young man knew what he was up against, but he didn't flee. He stood his ground and fought to keep his flock from falling into the hands of the outlaws. It ended with the young shepherd laying down his life for his sheep.

The ancient shepherd's dedication to his flock inspired biblical writers to speak of God as a 'shepherd.' God's dedication to Israel was that of a shepherd. Thus, the psalmist sings:

**"The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want...
Even if I go through the dark valley, I will not be afraid."** *Ps. 23:1, 4*

Here's an interesting development. Since the religious leaders of Israel took God's place on earth, they, too, were referred to as 'shepherds.' Unfortunately, with the passage of time, Israel's leaders deteriorated. When this happened, the prophet Ezekiel spoke out in God's name, saying:

"You are doomed, you shepherds of Israel! You take care of yourselves, but never tend the sheep.... You have not taken care of the weak ones, healed the ones that are sick, bandaged the ones that are hurt, brought back the ones that wandered off, or looked for the ones that were lost.... So listen to me, you shepherds. I, the Sovereign Lord, declare...I will take my sheep away from you.... I will give them to a king like my servant David to be their one shepherd... and he will take care of them" Ez.34:2-23

Now, it is precisely against this background that we must read today's Gospel. Jesus says:

**"I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep....
They will listen to my voice... and they will become one flock with one shepherd."**

In other words, Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy made by Ezekiel. Like the good shepherd, David, he cares for the weak & the helpless, heals the sick, & goes in search of the stray & lost sheep. Jesus does more. He lays down his life for his sheep. He does still more. He rises from the dead, sharing his risen life with his sheep.

This is what Peter refers to in today's 1st reading. He tells the people that it is through Jesus' power that the cripple has been healed. Peter invites the people to believe in Jesus and to be healed by him spiritually, just as the cripple was healed by him physically.

Furthermore, this is what John talks about in today's 2nd reading. He says that, through Jesus, the Father has made us his own children.

**What should be our response to all this...you ask?
Well, I am glad you asked that question!**

1st, it should be one of gratitude to Jesus. For through his death & resurrection, we have been saved from eternal death and raised up to eternal life. This is what St. John is referring in the 2nd reading when he says:

"My dear friends, we are now God's children, BUT it is not yet clear what we shall become. BUT, we know when Christ appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is."

2nd, our response should be one of profound openness to Jesus. Jesus is present in our midst, right now, continuing his work of salvation.

I close with this prayer:

Lord Jesus, through us—your Church, you continue to: care for the weak, heal the sick, bandage the wounded, bring back the stray and the lost. Continue to give us your strength to do your will. You, indeed, are the Good Shepherd promised by God. You not only laid down your life for us 2,000 years ago, BUT you continue to dwell in our midst, especially in your Word & your Sacrament. Together with you, our head, we are the Body of Christ ...your living witnesses in the modern world.

May Almighty God, our Abba, bless you...
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.