

A Colorado wool producer by the name of Tracy Eichheim writes the following:

"As long as sheep have a leader, they are absolved of thinking for themselves, they can just merrily follow along with the flock. We have not been able to figure out exactly how the leader is elected?, appointed?, created?. Most of the time, the leader will be an older ewe, unless there is a ram in the flock, and then he is almost always the leader. This does not mean that he will necessarily be the one in the front of the flock, in fact he will generally be the one bringing up the rear. Actually this is pretty smart, because if the big bad wolf is going to jump out and eat someone, it's probably going to be the first in line, not the last. The flock seems to take their cues from the ram as it seems he determines when it is time to do something, and how they should do it.

It is real funny watching a group of sheep, who have been traveling the same path out to pasture every day, suddenly look at each other in utter confusion, knowing that they are supposed to go out to pasture but not knowing how, on the day that we remove the ram from the flock!

Sometimes it is the boldest that will take the lead, "Hey, follow me, there is nothing to be afraid of."

Sometimes it is the one that just doesn't give a hoot, "Stay here and starve, see if I care, I'm going out for lunch".

Sometimes it is "If you go, I'll go".

But generally it is one of the older ewes that looks back and say "What a bunch of wimps!" as she heads out.

Until the age of about two, all sheep seem to survive by being copy-cats. Follow along, blend in, don't think." So writes Tracy Eichheim.

Those comments may give you something new to think about as you consider this question: what did Jesus mean when he referred to us as sheep? And what did he mean when he referred to himself as our shepherd? There's a lot to think about, so let's go.

To start out, sheep have strong flocking and following instincts. They operate on two familiar principles: "Strength in numbers" and "follow the leader." That can often have unintended consequences. There is report after report of a lead sheep trying to jump over a small chasm and unfortunately missing—with the rest of the flock following suit, to their destruction. It's not a stretch to suggest that humans also have strong flocking and following instincts, with the same potential for disaster. At various times in your life, following the crowd may seem like the smart thing to do. Each of us wants to belong, to fit in somewhere. But if you get into a flock that is moving away from God, you can bet that you're heading for a cliff. There is strength in numbers, but only when Jesus is the shepherd of your flock.

Next, sheep are fully domesticated animals. That means they depend on interaction with humans in order to survive. So while it's true that a sheep would instinctively eat, it takes a caregiver—a shepherd-- to lead them to the best areas for grazing and to supplement their diet, when necessary. Also, sheep need to be sheared and cleaned. They can't do it themselves. This too captures our sheep-like qualities. We cannot spiritually clean ourselves. Like a sheep trying to operate an electric razor, it's just not possible. But we can be cleansed. We can be sheared of our sins. It happens when forgiveness is announced in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It happened when you were washed in the water of rebirth in Holy Baptism. It happens

when you take your place at the Lord's Supper to feast on the body and blood of Jesus. And in this way your Shepherd feeds you. You need a steady diet of God's forgiving Word to sustain your faith. All you have to do is be there when it's feeding time.

That's good news, but there is this reality check: It is doubtful that sheep could survive in the wild. In fact, it's a given that sheep would be quickly taken down by predators if they had to fend for themselves. It's no secret that as a Christian, you have some powerful enemies. Some of them are obvious and others more subtle. All of them, however, would love to rob you of your faith, in one way or another. If we had to fend for ourselves, it is doubtful that we could survive the pressure. The attacks would become too hard to endure. It would be much easier to surrender to the herding instinct and follow the flock to our doom; but we are not left to try and defend ourselves. We have a shepherd who is willing and able to protect us. More than that, He would die to keep us safe. Listen to His words: "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—and I lay down my life for the sheep."

You have a shepherd who allowed himself to be devoured by the wolf of death so that you could live. On the rod and staff of the cross Jesus laid down his life for the sheep. And then, after laying down his life, he took it back up at his resurrection. His victory over evil and death is absolute. This is the shepherd who fights for you every day.

The story is told of a man who went to Ireland to visit his relatives. While he was staying at his cousin's farm, they decided to have some fun with him. After doing some chores in the fields, they told him to come in for dinner just as soon as he was through rounding up the sheep into the pen. After nearly an hour of chasing after sheep, trying to push, poke, prod, and even pull them with no success, he gave up and asked his cousins to help. They sent out their five-year-old daughter, who simply called out to the sheep, and within minutes they had all followed her through the gate into the pen.

Listen: You have a God who cleanses you, who feeds you, and who protects you for eternity.

The single most important thing to do each day that you wake up is to listen to his call and to follow his voice.