

Unless you are really, really into the subject, you probably are unaware of how we end up with hymns and spiritual songs. Most of the time, we hear something on Christian radio, and think, “Oh, that sounds good,” or we sing a hymn from a hymnal that we assume has been around for a while, and that’s it. But the fact of the matter is that everything we sing in worship was written by someone, who was shaped by their faith and the circumstances of the times in which they lived.

One of those people was a woman named Henrietta Louise von Hayn. Henrietta was raised in Germany in the mid-1700s and spent much of her life as a teacher at a girl’s school. She wrote approximately 40 hymns during her life, but only one has come into English and remains in use today. It is, appropriately, “I Am Jesus Little Lamb.” I say ‘appropriately’ because it is a simple song, obviously intended to be sung by children, and it’s easy to imagine Henrietta teaching it to her students. Truth is, I remember singing it growing up in Lutheran schools. But like many things aimed at children, it has much to say to adults as well.

1 I am Jesus' little lamb,  
Ever glad at heart I am;  
For my Shepherd gently guides me,  
Knows my need and well provides me,  
Loves me ev'ry day the same,  
Even calls me by my name.

2 Day by day, at home, away,  
Jesus is my staff and stay.  
When I hunger, Jesus feeds me,  
Into pleasant pastures leads me;  
When I thirst, He bids me go  
Where the quiet waters flow.

3 Who so happy as I am,  
Even now the Shepherd's lamb?  
And when my short life is ended,  
By His angel host attended,  
He shall fold me to His breast,  
There within His arms to rest.

Within three short stanzas, von Hayn explores a surprising number of concepts, all having to do with the Biblical analogy: Jesus is to you and me as a Shepherd is to sheep. She skillfully uses the details of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm to do so, as well as ideas taken from our reading from John 10. So today’ let’s use this time to think about this shepherd to sheep relationship. What does it really mean to be sheep, belonging to the Lord?

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. As recently as 2004, there was a 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 we 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.

Sheep are fully domesticated animals. That means they have come to 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.

But lest we think that being one of Jesus’ lambs is all green pastures and quiet waters, there is this reality check: It is doubtful that sheep could survive in the wild. In fact, it is almost a given that sheep would be quickly taken down by predators in they had to fend for themselves. It is no secret that as a Christian, you have some powerful enemies. Some of them are obvious and others far 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. Except, 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: 11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The

hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. “The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 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 saw the wolf coming and who allowed himself to be devoured 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 takes 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.

Being a sheep means you have a Shepherd who cleanses you from sin, who feeds you His sustaining Word, and who protects you for eternity by laying down his life for you and taking it back up again. Receive the care He gives you, and wherever life takes you, follow his voice.