

Alleluia! Christ is Risen !!!

When darkness begins to fall, and the sky slowly begins to change from blue to gray, a familiar voice rings out across the green pasture. Calling, calling, calling the flock. Gathering the scattered into the refuge of each other's company, the voice of the shepherd serves as a homing beacon. One by one he accounts for the sheep – HIS sheep: recognizing the trot of a young ewe followed by the greedy bleating of a new lamb; the young, bold ones; the sturdy, seasoned, dependable ewes who always come when called; and the yearlings full of full of energy, fearless and foolish. Seeing the limping old ram, his memory returns to the day – long time past – when that ram, younger and stronger, stood between the flock and three wolves who nearly killed him before the shepherd arrived to help chase off the intruder. He'll never forget the sound of yelping wolves being kicked and butted, even while one of them had clamped down on the ram's hind quarter.

He knows them all; they are his responsibility, his charge. He lives each day to lead and feed, gather and protect, making sure each one remains in the flock.

So, as the sun goes down, the shepherd gathers the sheep, and leads them down the hill. They follow his voice because when they hunger, his voice leads them to green pastures; when the day is long and hot, his voice brings them to wade in the cool, still waters to slake their thirst. His voice brings them home in the wilderness, to safety in danger, to warmth and security on cold, dark nights.

Sheep huddle together when it gets dark for protection, feeling safe surrounded by their kind. Even so, the ones on the outside of the flock remain vulnerable to being overpowered and dragged off by a pack of wolves. The sheepfold prevents that.

The fold sticks out in the landscape, a circle of stones about 2 feet high and 30 feet across – not really much to look at. Looking rude and spare the sheepfold's not made for comfort, nor is it built to keep the sheep inside. Any one of them could jump that wall at any time, but they don't because inside that round enclosure they know the security and the warmth of familiar bodies pressed against them.

Neither is a fold designed to keep anything out; any wolf or thief could jump or climb right over. But that thief better be strong and fast, because they'll have to lift 150 pound ewe over a 2 foot loose rock wall as the flock instantly, loudly raises the alarm. No doubt a predator could jump over, but that's not such a good idea with a hundred pairs of hooves waiting to pummel any unwelcome intruder into submission; I suspect it's a lesson they only learn once. Besides, the wolf is an opportunistic creature, and there's no opportunity here.

The fold is actually designed for one purpose – to keep vulnerable sheep from being dragged off under the cover of darkness. It protects the vulnerable perimeter from stealthy attack, and when the sheep bed down close together for warmth all that can be seen are the rock fence. That's the safety of the sheepfold the shepherd leads them to for the night. You'd think it was an oasis as eagerly as the sheep follow the shepherd, matching him step for step and rubbing up against

him, but there's no particular comfort there, not even food – the flock's never ending grazing sees to that – the fold offers only security and warmth of the others in the cold peril of darkness. No, these are working animals, kept for their wool and their lambs, not to be coddled. Sheep aren't like dogs that serve the shepherd with obedience and loyalty. There's nothing pet-like about animals who seem to live only to satisfy their perpetual appetites.

Once in a while a lone vulnerable sheep – not belonging to the flock – will bleat in the darkness. The soft bleating of the flock as they settle for the night guides him or her towards safety. It's no matter that the sheep is not part of the flock. The shepherd leaves one of the dogs in the opening of the fold, and wanders off into the darkness to guide the frantic outlier to the safety of fold and flock. The flock won't instantly recognize the newcomers as their own, but given a little time they'll make a place for them among them if for no other reason than the extra warmth of another body.

The shepherd won't be gone for long. He always returns – staff in hand – ready to swing the staff with brutal speed and force to protect the flock. In the fold, on the hills, in the pastures the shepherd always abides with them. In the cold, the darkness, in danger, the shepherd endures what they endure.

When the sheep arrive at the fold, they enter one by one through the single break in the rock wall. The opening – the gate – is narrow, only wide enough for one animal at a time. It's designed to be such. For once the flock safely enters the fold, the shepherd places his own

body in the opening so that nothing on either side of the gate can pass. Anything that enters or leaves must go through him. Some shepherds crouch down and lean against the rocks filling the opening. Others will lay down there. Either way, they will sleep, but like a mother with a newborn child their ears are tuned to the sound of distress, waking instantly at the sound of trouble or sensing something is amiss.

The shepherd and the flock – together they rest and sleep, waiting for the dawn of a new day when the shepherd calling, calling, calling will rouse each lamb and ewe and ram from sleep and bring them into a lush new pasture.

This morning Jesus reminds us,

“I am the good shepherd.”

Saying,

“I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

This morning Jesus tells everyone,

“I am the gate.

Assuring us, saying,

“Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture” (John 10:9).

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