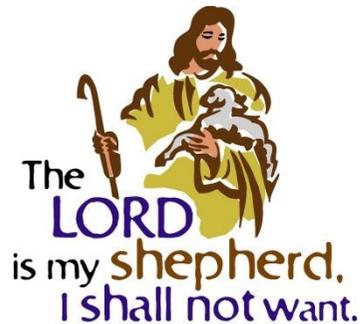


**PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES**  
**FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – YEAR A**  
(Good Shepherd Sunday)

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is always known as Good Shepherd Sunday because in each year of the liturgical cycle, the Gospel is always taken from the tenth chapter of St John, where Jesus speaks of himself as the good shepherd. In vv. 1–10 (Year A) Jesus describes himself as ‘the gate of the sheepfold’; in vv. 11–18 (Year B) he is ‘the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep’; and in vv. 27–30 (Year C) he speaks of giving eternal life to the sheep that belong to him.

**Psalm 22 (23)**



This is a psalm of trust in two discrete sections, focusing on God as Shepherd and God as Host. The image of God as a shepherd runs throughout the Bible (as, for example, Isaiah 40: 11, Ezekiel 34: 15–31, Micah 7: 14). It is a familiar notion for people living in a rural, semi-nomadic setting. The rod (crook) and the staff are everyday tools to protect the flock and ward off attackers.

Kings are also linked to the image of a shepherd guiding their flock. David son of Jesse, the young shepherd, was anointed king by Samuel. Jesus himself identified with this image too: ‘I am the good shepherd’ (John 10: 11).

The image of God as host was also powerful. In ancient times, people had a great sense of hospitality. Being someone’s guest would ensure protection from your enemies. God is the perfect host.

It is worth noting the change of tone in the way the psalm is written. The psalmist first talks about the Lord, but then more intimately, addresses God directly: ‘You are there ...; you have prepared ...’.

Early Christians commonly used this psalm during the sacraments of initiation: focusing on the water reviving drooping spirits at baptism, the anointing with oil at confirmation, and the banquet for the first Eucharist.



**Gospel John 10: 1–10**

**The parable of Jesus the Good Shepherd**

This story is the only parable in John’s Gospel. (The evangelist usually uses symbolic discourses.) A parable, *māsāl* in Hebrew, can also mean proverb or riddle. Some scholars see two separate parables in verses 1–5; vv. 1–3a showing contrasting approaches to the sheep, whereas, vv. 3b–5 focus on the relationship between the sheep and shepherd.

There is also discussion as to why this section of John’s Gospel immediately follows the story of the ‘man born blind’. It is thought to be a continuation of John’s account of the confrontation between Jesus and the unjust authorities. Jesus’s love and concern for his sheep stands out in sharp contrast to the bullying Pharisees.

**Shepherds in Judea**

The main part of Judaea is a central plateau stretching from Bethel to Hebron, a distance of about 35 miles, varying from 14 to 17 miles across. The ground for the most part was rough and stony. Judaea was much more a pastoral than an agricultural country. This is why shepherd imagery appears throughout the Bible: the most familiar figure of the Judean uplands is the shepherd. There were no sheep dogs in Palestine, the sheep knew and only obeyed the voice of their shepherd.

The sheep were kept mostly for their wool and milk, rather than meat, and so were often with the shepherd for some years.

At the end of the day, when the sheep were gathered into the fold, the shepherd held his rod across the entrance, quite close to the ground, and each sheep had to pass under it. As they passed beneath the rod, the shepherd examined each one to see if it had been injured during the day.

**‘I am the gate of the sheepfold’**

Jesus refers to two different kinds of sheepfold. In winter months the sheep were kept in communal sheepfolds in the villages and towns. They were protected by a strong door to which the guardian had a key. He was the gatekeeper who would let the shepherds in.

In warmer weather the sheep were gathered into hillside sheepfolds, open spaces enclosed by a low wall. There was an opening but no door. At night the shepherd lay down across the opening: he was literally ‘the gate’.