

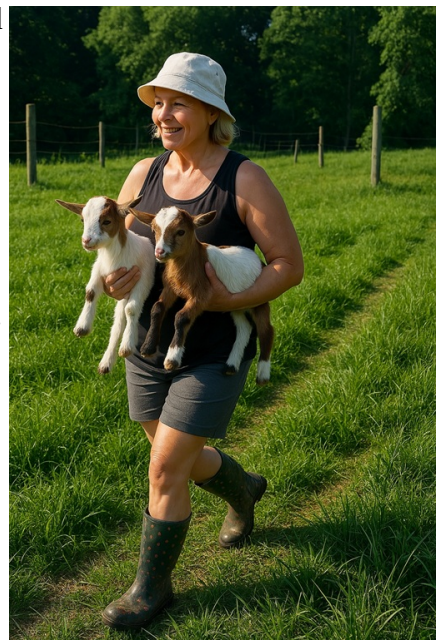
Shepherds

Shepherds have had a dubious social standing ever since humans began leaving their tents and livestock to live “civilized” lives in towns and cities. Since livestock – sheep, goats, cattle – were and are still essential to our economy, Shepherds stayed behind in the fields to take care of them. Someone had to do it, and so perhaps the ones that choose lives of relative solitude caring for our generally gentle hoofed servants are a special breed: inner-directed, contemplative, non-conformists, necessarily patient, and at peace with the natural world and its Creator. But shepherds paid a social price for their occupation. Shepherds, or their modern counterparts, goat herders, cowboys, and farmers are rarely seen as the social elite. It is a humble calling.

The Bible is full of references to shepherding; after all, the Jewish patriarchs were all shepherds. When Joseph welcomed his brothers into Egypt, they were given the land of Goshen, because as shepherds their occupation was an offense to the Egyptians. Moses led a nation of shepherds out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan where they continued their trade. Our Lord taught using parables about shepherds, even saying of Himself “I am the Good shepherd”. In this context, shepherding is perhaps the most noble of pursuits. For me, a farmer who has raised cattle, goats, and sheep at one time or another, being labeled a shepherd is a badge of honor. I am in good company.

It is hard to say which of the herd animals I like best. Sheep are not very bright, and compensate with a strong herd instinct that can be maddening at times. If any species needs a shepherd, it is sheep. And yet – there are few things more appealing than a new lamb. I love cattle. They are big and – mostly – slow moving, predictable, interested in good grass and sweet hay and each other. Yet remarkably, they can learn to come when they are called, particularly the dairy breeds. They have a sweet smell, and a placid, gentle spirit that makes being around them restful. They are warily curious about new things in their confines. Lie in their pasture in the evening and they will cautiously approach, snuffing and listening, trying to understand this new phenomena of a prone motionless human. It takes some courage on our part too – these are BIG animals after all, and should one step on you it would be painful - but they never do. If you are quiet enough, and patient enough, you may eventually feel a soft nose on or near your face, and a raspy tongue take an experimental taste. The naughty members of the ruminants are goats. At the moment I am learning to appreciate them more. They are far more intelligent than cattle or sheep, with a maddening penchant for mischief, but they can also be affectionate, amusing, and endearing. Baby goats are especially cute.

The Bible is replete with references to shepherds. In Isaiah 40:11 the prophet says of the coming Messiah, “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.” I know this feeling, having cradled newborn kids inside my jacket because they were too weak to stand, hoping to keep them warm until their



mother was through labor. In another bible parable Jesus teaches, “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found *it*, he lays *it* on his shoulders, rejoicing. (Luke 15:4-5). I saw that very parable come to life last week when a woman I know well spent an anxious hour searching for two missing baby goats, and when she found them, she carried them back to the fold with joyful tears. My wife Chris has, on more than one occasion, breathed her own breath into a newborn kid after a hard birth, delighting when the little one coughs and cries and lives. I find a quiet peace sitting on the milking stand beside a contented doe performing the ancient ritual of milking a dairy animal. They lean against me, bonding, trusting, eating good grain in this old partnership. There is much to be learned.

Shepherding is not always easy. There is the work, of course – feeding, carrying, filling, herding, medicating, repairs, construction, milking. It can make for early mornings and long days. But the hardest part is letting go when it’s time. Our flocks are our livelihood and sooner or later these animals we have come to love, animals we have birthed and nurtured, will need to be sold – or worse, lost to disease, injury, and old age. That is hard, sometimes too hard. This year, despite our’s and the vet’s best efforts, we lost a sweet doe and her kid during a complicated birth. I wept all the way home. Why? Why? She was just an animal. But my wife Chris and I are shepherds, and she was in our care. This is the price of the joy I feel when a little kid is born healthy, when I see our herd grazing contentedly, or when a sweet doe nuzzles me when I come to her gate.

In the last verses of John, Jesus asks Peter, “Simon, do you love me?” and Peter replies, “Lord, you know that I do.” “Then feed my sheep”, Jesus says. “Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep”. We shepherds understand that our calling represents God’s view of the entire world.