Sheep have been in the news a lot lately. First there was “Dolly”, Virginia Tech’s famous cloned co-ed. Then this year in the British Isles – and to a much lesser extent here in the US – we have seen countless numbers of poor sheep slaughtered because of Hoof and Mouth Disease. But despite their notoriety, we urban and suburbanites don’t know much about sheep.

Things were very different in the ancient times of the Bible. Sheep – not cattle – was the principal grazing industry of the ancient Near East. Shepherds were the ancient equivalent of our western cowboys.

Shepherding might have been an adventurous life – sleeping under the stars, living off the land – but it was also hard work for low pay. Sheep are very labor intensive. Sheep are reputed to be dumb and lacking in initiative. They are fragile creatures likely to fall over cliffs or entangle themselves in brush. Sheep are prone to illness, vulnerable to wild beasts, and subject to their own mindless herd behavior. Sheep are totally dependent upon a shepherd for survival.

No wonder our vocabulary includes expressions like “gentle as a lamb” and "sheep for the slaughter" and "sheepish" and "shear the sheep". And of course no one wants to be described as "the black sheep of the family".

Yet in the entire Bible there are no more beloved words than the "23rd Psalm", the shepherd’s Psalm. And in the gospel of John believers are presented as being blessed to be the sheep of Jesus the good shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep.

We are far removed from the ancient social world of sheep and shepherding. But we are drawn to that world and that kind of relationship like no other in the Bible.

For despite our aversion to sheep, the sheep's life also speaks to our experience. Who has not known what it is like to walk through the valley of the shadow of death? We know life to be a fragile gift at best, and a lonely cold night in the wilderness at worst. We know both the safety and dangers of going along with the herd - I mean crowd. We know what it's like to get stuck in a crevice, not knowing how we are going to get out of a bad situation we have fallen into. We know the uncomfortable feeling of being dependent upon someone else. We may know more about sheep than we thought!

Which is why the image of the good shepherd speaks to us. Even we city folk can grasp what a good shepherd is all about: a good shepherd is of course knowledgeable about his task. But a good shepherd is more than a skilled technician. A good shepherd is strong but tender, loyal and loving. A good shepherd leads and comforts and protects. A good shepherd attends to all of the needs of his sheep. A good shepherd is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. Who wouldn't want a friend, a companion, a guide, a shepherd, a God with qualities like that?
Sheep and their shepherd share a special kind of relationship, which speaks to our deepest human need: the need for HOPE. Not just hope for future glory. Not just hope for eternal life. But hope for worthwhile life in the present moment. Hope that says my needs will be met. Hope that I am and I will be accepted. Hope that I will find and experience love. That is the kind of hope a shepherd offers his sheep. And that is the kind of hope Jesus, OUR GOOD shepherd offers us.

The first line of the 23rd Psalm reads, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Commenting on this verse, Frederick Buechner asks, "I shall not want; is that true?" Buechner reminds us that we want so many things - happiness for ourselves and our families, success, good health, some measure of inner peace. We pray for so many things that are NOT given to us. Then Buechner adds, "But when the psalm says 'I shall not want', maybe it is speaking the utter truth anyhow. Maybe it means that if we keep our eyes open, if we keep our hearts and lives open, we will at least never be in want of the one thing we want more than anything else. Maybe it means that whatever else is withheld, the shepherd never withholds himself, and he is what we want more than anything else." (Listening to your life p. 179)

To live as sheep under the care of Jesus the good shepherd is to live within the open love and strong encircling arms of God. To live as sheep under the care of Jesus the good shepherd means that no matter what evil you face or burden you carry, you have the hope that God will be with you. To live as sheep under the care of the good shepherd is to live with confidence that the God we know in Jesus the good shepherd is and always will be with us. To live as sheep under the care of the good shepherd is to give of ourselves to the one gives all to us.

What more could we want?

The Lord is our shepherd, the good shepherd. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever! AMEN.

Psalm 23
1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.
4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.
5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

John 10:22-30
22 At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” 25 Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; 26 but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. 30 The Father and I are one.”