

Erin's Chicks

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Jn. 10:22-30

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My niece, Erin, has chickens.

Erin works at the U.S. Postal Service Distribution Center in Eagan,
where 6 million letters and 500,000 large envelopes and magazines
are processed every day!

Erin works the night shift.

One night two years ago, a crate of a hundred live baby chicks arrived in the mail.
For some reason they could not be sent on.
The live chicks were going to be thrown in the dumpster.

Erin took the chicks and raised them.

The first days she dipped her finger in water and taught the chicks to drink.
She built a small brooder in her kitchen.
She kept them warm and fed for weeks.
She sang to them.

A month later she built a coop and fenced yard for them.

Safe and fed and free to roam, they spent their days scratching for bugs and enjoying sun.

At night she brought them in the coop to protect them from raccoons and coyotes.

It is a beautiful sight to see her colorful chickens clucking and pecking in grass.

I leave them alone.

I have tried to get close, to call them over and feed them corn from the bin,
but the chickens don't know me, they don't know whether I am safe,
they don't recognize my voice.

The chicks run away when I approach.

Coming home from work, before she sleeps or has her own dinner,
Erin feeds the chickens.

I have watched her with wonder and envy.

"Here, chicky, chicky. Here, chicky, chicky."

They run to the gate to greet.

Then she sings to them as she fills their feeders and water tin.

Chickens flocking around her, clucking and crowing and fluttering.

They know her voice.

They know the sound of love.

Our gospel reading takes place in the later part of Jesus' ministry.

In this tenth chapter Jesus tells plainly about himself and his mission.

Soon he will raise Lazarus from death,
wash his disciples feet,
be arrested and killed.

This tenth chapter gives two of the seven famous "I am" statements of Jesus,
statements describing himself.

"I am the good shepherd."

"I am the door of the sheep."

Jesus describes himself as shepherd and gateway protecting.

I don't know much about sheep or shepherds.

I have seen Erin with her chickens.

I have seen my grandfather with his dairy cows.

I have watched my daughter foster dogs.

But all I know of *sheep* is only from what I have read.

Jesus used a curious metaphor to describe himself—*shepherd*.

Note that this is *not* a noble, dignified, powerful description.

He could have said,

“I am the benevolent king.”

“I am the victorious general.”

“I am the generous aristocrat.”

“I am the impartial judge.”

But he chose *shepherd*, a low-class, dead-end job.

This not a sheep *owner*.

The metaphor is not someone rich in sheep, with flocks covering hills.

A shepherd is a hired boy from the village,

someone not very big or useful for other tasks.

Most families at the time had only a couple of sheep.

People lived in villages and worked fields just outside of town.

They could afford only a couple of sheep.

But sheep had to be taken to pastures beyond fields, apart from village.

So several families would together hire a lad to watch all their sheep.

Several families together would hire a boy to take their sheep to far hills,

entrusting this child to protect their investment and care for their livestock.

The shepherd boy would take the sheep of several families,

knows which sheep belong to which family,

guide and herd them to green pastures, cool water, clear air,

bind up their scratches and pull them from ditches.

At night, too far to come home,

the shepherd boy would gather sheep into a rock enclosure to keep them from straying.

The shepherd boy would lay across the pen entrance to make sure none wandered.

The boy would half-sleep, always alert for wolves sneaking by.

By day, alone in the hills,

the boy would play his flute,

practice his sling,

sing to sheep to pass the time.

The sheep became his companions

and the sheep learned to trust his voice.

It was a lonely job.

It was a low-wage job.

It was a dangerous job,

one broken leg and the shepherd could not get home and the sheep would die.

This is how Jesus described himself,

tremendous responsibility to love and nurture,

but as the least and lowest in the village.

There is one more thing about shepherds.

The families hired only someone who was fearless.

Their investment depended on one keeping the sheep safe.

Shepherds had to have courage, pluck, resolve, determination.

They are fiercely protective.

They practice their sling to pass the time,

but also to stay sharp for the predators that come.

Once when I was a boy I made a sling out of a piece of leather and shoestrings.

I was a skinny, small kid and got beat up a lot.

I read about David slaying the giant Goliath with a sling and stones¹

and figured I could use some skills like that.

I got pretty good at slinging stones at trees.

But I also was frightened at the power of slings.

With small stones I was *shredding bark* off trees!

¹ 1 Samuel 17:17-58.

A skilled shepherd could sling stones a hundred miles an hour!

A stone from a sling has the stopping power of a modern .44 Magnum revolver! ²

Slings are meant *to kill*.

Tossing stones at a jackal will only rile it up.

A shepherd has to *take down* the threat.

And that is another thing about shepherds.

No one messes with their sheep.

No wolf. No jackal. No thief. No hawk.

No – one – messes.

So when Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd,” he is telling us
 that while he doesn’t have an army at his call,
 that while he does not look an impressive nobleman with rich lands,
 that while he has no influence on the ruling powers of the world,
 he will stand with us,
 he alone will stay with us to the end,
 he is always there when we need him.

So when Jesus said, “... no one snatches them out of the Father’s hand,” he is telling us
no one messes with his sheep.

So when Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice...” he is telling us
 that *we know* the sound of what gives life and protects.

So what is the sound of Jesus’ voice?

It is the sound of love.

It is the sound of Erin singing, “Here, chicky, chicky.”

It is the sound of safety.

It is the sound of singing slings driving off danger.

It is the sound of belonging.

It is the sound of shepherd footsteps and flute circling and watching.

What is the sound of Jesus’ voice that we know?

It is the sound of affection and welcome,

 the sound of forgiveness and restore,

 the sound of justice and righting of entrenched ills.

The sound of Jesus’ voice

 is the sound of the cheerful babbling of you gathering before worship.

It is the sound of listening and caring

 as we take time for each other’s hardships and hard days.

It is the sound of accepting one another’s shortcomings

 so as to honor the person God created.

It is the sound of giving of self and time even when inconvenient

 because we belong to this one flock

 and we are not our own but belong to Jesus.

You know the sound of Jesus’ voice.

You know the sound of welcome, acceptance, love, forbearance, mercy.

You know the sound.

Amen.

² DailyMail.com, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4541318/Roman-sling-bullets-deadly-44-Magnum.html>