

Scouting the Divine: Unforgettable Lessons From a Shepherd

✖ In my research for *Scouting the Divine: My Search for God in Wine, Wool, and Wild Honey*, I spent time with a shepherd in Oregon, a farmer in Nebraska, a beekeeper in Colorado and vintner in California. With each person, I opened up the scripture and asked, “How do you read this passage—not as a theologian—but in light of what you do every day?”

The journey was chock-full of spiritual insights, but one of my favorite stops was my time with Lynne, a shepherdess, who took care of a flock of a few dozen sheep in the fields near her home in Oregon. Not only did we feed and water the sheep together, but we just spent time among the flock sitting in the field, watching the sheep and talking.

During our time together, I was struck by just how much a sheep knows its shepherd. One of the most amazing times I had with the shepherdess, Lynne, was the very first time she introduced me to her flock. I followed her up a muddy path to the upper field where the sheep were grazing.

She whispered to me, “When they hear my voice, they’ll come running.”

Then simply by saying the words, “Sheep, sheep, sheep,” she called her flock. Every last sheep in the field bolted toward her.

That moment was powerful for me. John 10 describes the sheep knowing the shepherd’s voice as a metaphor for us knowing

God's voice. Yet it isn't just a metaphor—it's the way sheep really behave. Standing in the field with Lynne and watching the sheep run toward her made that verse come alive in a whole new way. I recognized that just as a sheep is created to know its shepherd, we are created to know God and live in relationship with Him.

During my research on sheep, I discovered a remarkable story from Gary Burge, a professor at Wheaton College, that illustrates the close relationship of shepherds and their flocks. He describes how Israeli soldiers visited a poor village outside of Bethlehem after a Palestinian uprising and demanded that the people pay the taxes they owed. They refused.

The officer in charge gathered up all the animals of the village—primarily sheep and goats—and placed them into a huge pen. A poor woman approached the officer in charge and begged him to release her animals. Because the poor woman's husband had been imprisoned, her sheep were literally all she had.

The officer laughed at her request. How could she possibly find her dozen sheep in a pen of more than 1,000 animals?

The woman challenged the officer. If she could find her animals, could she keep them?

Intrigued, the soldier agreed.

The woman then invited her 10-year-old son to stand before the pen. He pulled out a flute and began to play a simple tune. As he walked through the fenced-in area, a dozen sheep gathered behind him, following him all the way home.

The officer and soldiers were impressed. They broke into applause, shut the gate and then announced that no one else could use the trick to get their sheep back.

Why did the sheep follow the boy? Because they knew he was their shepherd. And they knew he was a good shepherd. They were not only familiar with his voice, they knew the very tunes he played on his flute—songs he had played in the fields many times before.

That portrait of a sheep knowing its shepherd so well gives me hope that I, too, can know God intimately. For me, spending time with a loving shepherd was a powerful portrait of God's love for each of us—a love that is tangible, practical and unending. From this perspective, some of the seemingly opposite attributes of God, such as discipline and grace, began to make sense.

Over the course of our time together, I watched a shepherd who truly loved her sheep—it was so evident in the way she spoke to and about them. Whether feeding her animals by hand, changing their bandages, administering medicine or keeping a watchful eye, her love was constantly on display. I also watched when Lynne had to reprimand or punish a sheep by placing it in time out. Even those moments were founded in love and caring for her flock.

The entire time, Lynne wanted what was best for the flock and the individual sheep. She was for them. For me, it was a tangible reminder of just how much God is for us, individually and as His flock.

Margaret Feinberg is a popular speaker and critically acclaimed author of *Scouting the Divine: My Search for God in Wine, Wool, & Wild Honey*. Become her friend on Facebook or

follow her on Twittter @mafeinberg.