

The video was rather timely across my social media....

A young man is seen wrapping a leather strap around the hind leg of an animal that has fallen in to a narrow ditch. With great effort he tugs and drags out a lamb. He drops the strap off the animals' leg and you think, "oh what a heart warming video..." except that it keeps on going.

The lamb in its excitement begins jumping and running only to fall in to the same ditch just a few meters down the way. The video ends with the young shepherd hanging his head and starting to walk towards the same task in a different spot.

The lord is my shepherd, and likely just as tired and annoyed as that guy in the video.

The life of a shepherd hasn't changed much over the last few thousand years. I found an article that described it along these lines....

Gaetan sleeps fully clothed, ready to awaken at any time during the night should wolves or other predators attack the herd while he has them penned by the house. He has to continually move the location of the enclosure to avoid the predators knowing exactly where to find the flock. During the day he takes the sheep further in to the mountains, making sure that they don't over graze and damage the environment beyond use. He continually smells of raw wool, and in October, at the end of the season, he takes a month to get used to being around people, because he knows the animals far better.

Being a shepherd is not the idyllic life we see in paintings or ballet. Shepherding is hard, far harder than I even imagined. It requires a love of the animals, the earth, and a peaceful solitude that you will allow to be broken at any time. According to one article I read, the shepherd must defend their flock knowing that they may well lose one or more to predators at any moment.

Shepherds work in hills and mountains, because that terrain is not really conducive for growing crops. The grazing areas are important, but must be managed. Left on their own, the sheep would strip the land bare, making it useless. But the shepherd guides and calls them and moves them about, insuring that there are plenty of nutrients and that the earth has time to heal.

The shepherd is there to help birth the lambs each spring. Said one person, he had half of his 700 sheep lamb in one ten day period. Some fine, some needing lots of assistance. That's an average of 35 animal births a day, he had had little to no sleep, but said it was worth it when he saw the younglings.

Fog, said one, fog was the worst, because sheep get lost if they don't have one another to follow. So the shepherd would be constantly calling out to the animals to bring them in to the group.

I must admit that, given the paucity of modern shepherds, finding interviews to discover what their lives were like was hard. But I don't think I need to break down the symbolism too much for us to get it.

We refer to God and Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and it usually has this rather Fragonardian cloudy sky with lovely pink over tones as a decidedly non-middle eastern Jesus is holding a lamb. What I've discovered is that nothing is further from the truth. The image of a good shepherd should likely be a ragged individual that looks tired, smells of lanoline mixed with a variety of "earthy" scents, wearing boots covered a brown material to be determined later but certainly not worn in the house, with a dog by them, leading sheep, carrying a broken-legged lamb, smiling and happy and having it no other way.

God certainly is the good shepherd, and I'm a little more comfortable with my new image of God than the old man reaching out to touch Adam on the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

My new image of God, informed by these interviews with modern shepherds is likely closer to the image conjured by those who heard the original story. Because shepherding is dirty, tiring, work only done by those who love the animals and feel a bond with them that they all say defies words. That's the God I know, and my God is a Good Shepherd.

My God is in the dirt with me. My God doesn't sit back and watch me while I graze, My God sits and watches the world around me, scanning for danger, ready to defend and protect.

My God knows that if left to my own devices, I'll destroy my world and make it not be able to sustain me or anyone else. And so I get guided to new people and places to nourish me.

My God knows that I can get lost in my life on a clear day. Add the fog of uncertainty, doubt, or confusion, and My God knows that it will take extra work to call to me and keep me focused on finding my way back to safe, loving arms.

When I'm hurt, physically or emotionally, my God is there. Holding me and giving me a place to burrow in and find peace. When I am happy and playful in the world, My God is there smiling, sharing my joy.

I keep saying My God, because the effort required to shepherd this sheep is, in my mind, more than enough work for one. I don't mean to be the sheep that was in the video, but I'm the sheep in the video. And so are you.

The Good shepherd does not tire. The Good Shepherd may hang their head and move to pull us out of the next hole we put ourselves in. But the Good Shepherd is always calling to us, seeking the best for us, and sleeps in full clothing ready to protect us at the slightest sound of danger.

I'm arrogant enough to think that I would take all of my Shepherd's attention. After all they are always there for me.

I'm also smart enough to know that that is the beauty of the Good Shepherd. In a flock of enumerable souls, the Good Shepherd makes me feel like I'm the only one. But that's how we all feel. That's what makes the shepherd a Good one. No matter what situation we find ourselves in, the Shepherd will be there. Running to help, laughing beside, commiserating, or scanning the creation for danger while I blissfully pay attention to my own wants and desires, even ignoring the one looking out for me. And God does the same for each of us here, each of us watching online, each of not here in some form, and all creation.

The painter's images are nice, but I think I'll always prefer to think of the Good Shepherd covered in muck, because the Good Shepherd is beside me, dragging me out the mess I've made, and ready to do it when I jump right back in.