Gathering God’s Children

God assures us of God’s constant, shepherd-like care.

♦ Jesus assures us that he is the good shepherd, who knows each of us by name.
♦ The Good Shepherd is an image of Jesus with warm appeal to Christians of all ages.
♦ In today’s session, children explore this central gospel image and continue their celebration of Easter.

Question of the Week
Who cares for you like a shepherd? In what ways?

Core Session
♦ Getting Started
♦ Gospel Story: Jesus Knows Me (crèche set)
♦ Praying Together

Enrichment
♦ Welcome the Good News
♦ Singing Together
♦ Drama: Puppet Show (buttons, thread, plastic needles, clean old sport socks, handkerchief)
♦ Celebration: Easter Party (blank white paper party goods, wooden broomstick or dowel; optional: marshmallows, toothpicks)
♦ Info: Children and the Gospel
♦ Info: Where You’ll Find Everything Else

Helps for Catechists
♦ More about Today’s Scriptures
♦ Reflection
♦ The Scriptures and the Catechism
♦ Liturgy Link: Easter and the Book of Acts, Part 2
♦ The World of the Bible: The World

Scripture
John 10:11-16
**Getting Started** (10-15 minutes)

Children play a variation of Mother, May I?

As children arrive, greet them with the Easter Greeting:

*Greeter:* Alleluia! Jesus is risen.
*Children:* Jesus is risen. Alleluia!

Invite children to play a calling game. Make two lines of masking tape on the floor, each facing the other, and each one foot away from the wall. Choose a child to be the first leader.

The leader stands behind one line. All other children stand behind the other line. Explain that the object is to cross the leader’s line; the first child to do so becomes the next leader. The leader calls out directions—such as those given in Mother, May I?—to each child in turn, first calling out the child’s name. That child follows the leader’s directions, taking, for example, three giant steps or six baby steps.

If the leader forgets the child’s name, that child becomes the new leader. *(If this game is too easy for the children, expand the directions to include last names.)* Continue until several children have had the chance to be leader.

Gather children around you in the storytelling area and explain:

- We know each other by name—and so does someone in today’s story. Let’s find out who.

**Gospel Story** (5-10 minutes)

*Our Shepherd Calls Us*

*Story Focus:* Use sheep and a shepherd figure from a crèche set. Use another male figure from a crèche set to be a “helper.”

*(Show sheep figures.)* The sheep are in the field. There is good grass for them to eat and clean water for them to drink. The sun shines on their wool, and they feel happy when the breeze cools their muzzles.

Their helper brings them fresh hay to eat.

One sheep leaps up in fear and begins to bleat.

“Baaa! Baaa!”

The other sheep stumble to their feet and look.

A wolf! The sheep turn to run, but their turning takes them in every direction. They trip and bump, not knowing where to go. The hungry wolf draws closer.

Some sheep run to the helper. *(Show helper figure.)* He can save them!

But the helper sees the sharp teeth of the wolf. He turns and runs, far, far away. *(Take helper figure away.)*

“Baaa! Baaa!” The bleating grows loud; the wolf crouches to spring.

“Get away!” yells a voice. A wooden crook smashes the ground, and the wolf leaps away. The sheep’s bleating grows joyful.

The shepherd has come! *(Show shepherd figure.)* He knows how to save his sheep. The wolf slinks away from the strong voice and heavy crook. The sheep tumble around the legs of their beloved shepherd.

“It’s all right, Brownhorn,” he calls out. “Here, Black Ear, come to me.” He knows his sheep by name. And they know him. They draw close and he comforts them.

*(Pause.)* “Jesus Says to Us”, “I am your Good Shepherd. You are my sheep. I call each of you by name. I know you and you know me.”

I wonder how Jesus knows us. I wonder how we can know Jesus.

**Praying Together** (5 minutes)

End today’s session with a circle prayer.

If you used today’s Holy Communion activity, ask children to bring their pictures to a prayer circle. Stand in a circle with the children. Say:

- Let us pray to Jesus for other people.

Children can simply name people or can show their pictures and name the people drawn. Encourage children to respond to each prayer with this simple response:

- Hear us, Good Shepherd.

Close by praying:

- Jesus, thank you for coming to us to love us and take care of us. *Amen.*

**Note:** Distribute this week’s *At Home with the Good News* to children before they leave, or e-mail it to their parents after the session.
Welcome the Good News (10-15 minutes)
On page 1 of today’s Welcome the Good News, you’ll find an illustrated version of today’s story.

We extend the themes of the story on page 2 with the scripture skills activity Welcome God’s Word. Invite children to work together to solve the puzzle. Children will also find a With Your Family activity they can lead at home or practice in the group.

Singing Together (5-10 minutes)
From Singing the Good News you and the children can sing together:
- “Celebrate Life” (p. 36 in the songbook)
- “God’s Alive” (p. 40 in the songbook; also available as an MP3)
- “Jesus Says to Us” (p. 46 of the songbook; also available as an MP3)

Drama (15-30 minutes)
Puppet Show
This show could be performed for preschoolers or kindergartners. Make necessary arrangements with other catechists before the session.

Show children how to turn their hands into sheep puppets. You’ll need sport socks, thread and buttons. Thread together two buttons on a single thread. Tie off the thread to form a loop.

Cut off the toe of a sock. Slip the sock, rough side-out, over your hand, leaving the edge at the base of your fingers. Loop the buttons and thread on your fist to make eyes, as shown in the diagram. By moving your thumb, you can make your sheep puppet talk and sing.

Teach children to sing this song, sung to the tune of “Jesus loves me, this I know”:

Jesus knows just who I am.
He’s the Shepherd, I’m his lamb.
When I hear him call to me,
I will follow where he leads.
Yes, Jesus knows me; (three times)
He knows just who I am.

Finally, prepare the puppet show. Ask a volunteer who knows the names of all the children in the group to play the part of Jesus. (Ask this child to remove the sock and drape a handkerchief over his or her puppet, as a head covering.)

The puppet show is enacted as follows:
- Jesus appears first on stage and tells who he is. (A table turned on its side works well as a stage.)
- Jesus calls each sheep by name, using the children’s own names. Encourage Jesus to vary these calls by saying, for example, “Yo, Liliana!” or “Over here, Sasha!”
- As Jesus calls out a name, that sheep appears on stage, calling out a response, such as “Here I am!” or “Coming, Jesus!” (Encourage the children to make up their own responses.)
- When all sheep are on stage, they sing the song given above, “Jesus knows me.”

Ask children to practice two or more times before presenting the puppet show to other children.

Celebration (10-30 minutes)
Easter Party
Activity Soundtrack: Play “Jabulani Africa.” (Open your Spring-B Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Companion Music for options on obtaining this music.) This lovely African gospel song invites people to rejoice in the risen Jesus. The Zulu word jabulani means “rejoice.” The song is performed by the African Children’s Choir. You can learn more about them at http://www.africanchildrenschoir.com.
Children continue their celebration of the Easter season with another group party. Explain to children that this is still Easter. Ask them to help prepare a small party.

Possible activities:
◆ Use drawings and construction-paper cutouts to decorate their plates with sheep and shepherds.
◆ Make sheep-shaped snacks with marshmallows and toothpicks.

You can also invite children to play Listen for the Shepherd, a game based on today’s story. Play this in a large space cleared of furniture or other obstacles.

Pick one child to be the true shepherd. Give this child the wooden crook. Pick two other children to be false shepherds. Ask remaining children to close their eyes and to wander in the open space; these children are the sheep.

Ask all the shepherds to call the sheep by name, over and over. The sheep (with eyes closed) move away from the false shepherds and go to the voice of the true shepherd. When they find the true shepherd, they hold onto his or her crook. Continue until all the sheep have found the true shepherd.

Children and the Gospel
Christian faith is founded on belief in a loving, nurturing God whose truest image is found in Jesus. In today’s gospel, Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and whose sheep know him. In today’s session, the children explore this image of God’s loving care.

Few children today have the knowledge and familiarity with sheep that Jesus’ listeners had. One Sunday in Easter, a teacher with a country home brought to her faith formation group one of her sheep, inviting the children to stroke its firm and waxy fur. Not many churches could arrange this experience for their religious education programs, but if your church is one of them, the children will remember it all their lives!

In the absence of live sheep, you can share with the children books about sheep found in a children's book about sheep. We recommend you look for nonfiction books about sheep as well as this picture book for the first graders:

The Lord is My Shepherd illustrated by Anne Wilson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 2003). Fluid, colorful art integrated with a multicultural presentation makes this book a new treasure for sharing familiar and beloved scripture with children in a thoroughly contemporary style.

Where You’ll Find Everything Else
◆ Attached to this Session Plan you will find:
  — Backgrounds and reflections for today’s readings, titled More about Today’s Scriptures.
  — A shareable story script of today’s Gospel Story: Our Shepherd Calls Us.
  — This week’s Bible Skills for Third Graders activity.
  — An optional, on-going activity exploring the Eucharist.
  — The Jesus’ Table poster, to use with the optional Eucharist activity.
  — An optional activity titled Catholic Basics.
  — This week’s At Home with the Good News, to distribute or email to group members after the session.
◆ Open your Spring-B Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Seasonal Articles to find:
  — Information on Spring-B’s Models of the Faith.
  — For catechists and/or families, an article titled Eastertide: The Great Fifty Days.
  — For catechists and/or families, an article titled The Passover: Old and New.
**More about Today Scriptures**

Today’s readings assure us of God’s constant, shepherd-like care. In his sermon in Acts, Peter preaches that salvation is to be found in Jesus Christ of Nazareth, crucified, but raised from death by God. The author of 1 John tells us that, because of God’s love shown in Jesus, we are now God’s children. In the gospel, Jesus explains how he, as our Good Shepherd, lays down his life because he cares for his sheep.

**Acts 4:8-12**

Peter and John’s arrest is instigated by the Sadducees, the Jewish group who accepted only the written law and rejected the oral tradition followed by the Pharisees. Thus they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees, however, believed in a future general resurrection, but Peter and John proclaim that this promised future resurrection is now a present and life-giving reality in Jesus.

The rulers, elders and scribes make up the members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish court responsible for internal affairs. The appearance of the apostles before this body parallels Jesus’ examination by the Sanhedrin. As Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit empowers the apostles to answer.

**1 John 3:1-2**

Today’s reading again takes up the theme of Christians and sin, this time in the context of their adoption as “children of God” (v. 1). This special relationship to God was formerly extended to Israel as a people and especially to the king as Israel’s representative. Here this intimate relationship is proclaimed as a present reality for all who believe that Jesus is the Christ.

In Hebrew idiom, “to be the child of” meant to exhibit the characteristics of one’s father. Christians are truly God’s children now, yet they are also still in the process of growing into resemblance to God by imitating Christ. Our resemblance to God is evidenced in the realm of behavior.

**John 10:11-18**

Today’s reading is the fourth of the great “I am” discourses. In the Old Testament the absolute statement “I am” is used as a formula of God’s self-revelation (Exodus 3:14; Deuteronomy 32:39; Isaiah 43:10-13). In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses it of himself in a similar way (6:20; 8:58; 13:19; 18:5).

From this usage, John develops the discourses using a predicate “I am” statement (bread of life, 6:35; light of the world, 8:12; door, 10:7; good shepherd, 10:11; resurrection and life, 11:25; way, truth and life, 14:6; true vine, 15:1) to show Jesus’ divinity and his relationship to humankind.

In the Old Testament, God is called the Shepherd of Israel, as is David and the Davidic Messiah. Today’s reading develops the figure of the shepherd of the sheep. Jesus is “the good shepherd” (v. 11).

The word *good* (Greek, *kalos*) more literally means “beautiful,” as in an ideal of perfection. Here it might be rendered as model. Jesus is the model shepherd, both because of his willingness to lay down his life and because of his intimate knowledge of his flock.

The intimacy between the shepherd and his flock parallels that between the Father and the Son. The purpose of this mutual knowledge is to bring Jesus’ followers, both the flock of Israel and the Gentile flocks, into union with him and with one another.

**Reflection**

Good Shepherd Sunday rolls around again, and we dread being compared to sheep: wooly, stupid and directionally challenged.

So maybe we should focus instead on the shepherd: there are many reasons why he has been beloved for centuries. We who have grown overly cynical about leadership, given the disasters in church, state and corporate worlds, can find refreshment in this portrait.

In utter simplicity and without drawing attention to himself, this leader sacrifices his own life for his friends. He is confident and calm, nobly laying down his life. Although the thugs may seem to control him at his trial and crucifixion, he in reality is directing the order of events. Why? That seems a mystery, and is in fact the same question the poet Christina Rossetti asked: “Is one worth seeking, when Thou hast of Thine/ Ninety and nine?”

Such dedication is beyond human comprehension, but hints of a supreme love.
The Scriptures and the Catechism

Today’s readings remind us that what happened to Jesus was the working out of God’s plan of salvation. God, the loving Father, desired to bring all humanity back into the right relationship as the new covenant community. Since God is our Father, we are God’s children (CCC, #39–43, 238–42, 370, 2779–93). This is the basic Christian vision that reveals how God sees our world and is also the reason for the respect and reverence owed to every other human person. Since we are God’s children, the Church can be aptly understood as the family of God (CCC, #1655–58, 759).

Liturgy Link

Easter and the Book of Acts, Part 2

Purpose of Luke’s Writing

Employing sound scholarship, Luke attempted to present an accurate, ordered and reliable account. He tells of Jesus’ saving ministry and of how the Spirit of Jesus established and worked through the Church, beginning in Jerusalem and on to Rome, the capital of the empire. (See Luke 4:16-30 and Acts 1:8, the programmatic verses for the two volumes respectively.)

In addition to this overall purpose, Luke wanted to show that the formation and spread of the Church was the natural outgrowth of Jesus’ life and ministry and that Christianity was the continuation of Judaism. Luke saw in the Church the fulfillment of God’s promise of salvation found in the Old Testament, and he wished to argue that Christianity should enjoy the same privilege of official recognition in the Roman Empire as did Judaism.

Rome considered Judaism a legal religion (religio licita). And although Jews were released from the Roman requirement of Caesar worship, Christians were not regarded as Jews and their loyalties to Christ as Lord could be perceived as a threat to the sovereignty of the Roman emperor. With the ever-present possibility of persecution, Luke attempted to make the statement that and Christians were not politically dangerous to the Roman authorities.

Yet another purpose of Luke’s double work was to proclaim that Jesus’ salvation is meant for Jew and Gentile. The theme of the universality of salvation flows through the gospel and Acts. The two volumes also are united by the activity of the Holy Spirit. More than any of the other evangelists of the Bible, Luke emphasized the importance and work of the Spirit as the initiator of the works of salvation history.

In Acts, Luke presented the Spirit as the active presence of Jesus in the Church. The Spirit empowered and directed the Church outward. It accomplished its purpose through prompting, validating and extending the spread of the good news and the sovereignty of Christ through the ministry of the disciples and first evangelists. The work of the Spirit is so prominent in Luke’s second volume that some think it could just as aptly be called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.”

The World of the Bible

The World

As so often in John’s gospel and letters, many terms have two levels of meaning. Usually the world (Greek, cosmos) would describe the ordered quality of God’s creation.

But since John also sees a spiritual dimension to all of our existence, he uses the world as a shorthand way to refer to the forces that we often experience that resist the ordering power of God and so stand in opposition to Jesus and the Christian community.

But we must always remember that, although the world is hostile to God, God is not hostile to the world, which God created and has never ceased to love and care for, and so sends Jesus “into the world” for its salvation.