

**The Life of a Sheep:
April 26, 2026**

I don't know a lot about sheep.
I'm from Iowa.
Ask me about pigs...
Ask me about corn...
These are things I know.

Not sheep. **[1 Prey]**
So I did a little research.
This is information...
From Michigan State University...
The extension service wrote:

Sheep are prey animals...
And their natural instinct...
Is to flee a situation...
They perceive as dangerous.

And since they are prey animals...
They have been designed... in a way...
That helps them to avoid danger.

Wide angle vision...
The ability to direct their ears toward sounds.
And an acute sense of smell...
All keep them safe from predators.

In other words...
They are always...
On the lookout...
For trouble.

And you know what happens...
When we are always living in a state...
Of heightened fear...
And on the lookout for trouble... we find it.

[VIDEO - Sheep Ditch] [2 Sheep]

This video has captured my imagination...
Since the very first time... I saw it.

I think it's because...
It feels like it's true.
Like sometimes...

In this life...
When we are afraid...
Instead of running...
Into the fullness of freedom...
Of the whole field that lies... in front of us...

We return to the very things...
That have hurt us in the first place.

Now... the farmer... went to great effort...
To set that sheep free.
But that sweet little lamb...
Didn't embrace...
The freedom...
The fullness of life...
That it had been given.

Does that sound familiar to you?

Now listen. **[3 Assembly]**
It's time for a little confession.
If you have been around me...
At all... in the past couple weeks...
Prior to our Synod Assembly...
You have probably heard me whine.
About having to go.

Generally... I do not like Synod Assemblies...
Because I don't like three day meetings...
And I'm not good at sitting still...
And I don't like people...
Wasting time.

For those who don't know...

The Synod Assembly is a gathering...
Of representatives... from the 150 congregations...
Of the Rocky Mountain Synod...
Which includes... Wyoming... Utah... Colorado...
New Mexico... and just a wee little bit of Texas.

It's a really big area...
And the assembly...
Is a really big business meeting.

And I want to tell you...
Something has changed...
In our synod.

Not the fact... that I can't sit still...
For hours at a time...
And listen to endless stuff.

I still don't like that.

But I have renewed hope...
For our synod. I really do. **[4 Bishop]**
We have a new bishop...
She has been our bishop... since 2024.

Her name is Meghan Johnston Aelabouni.
And under her leadership...
Some really significant changes...
Have been made.

Two things in particular....
I want to mention today.

First... she announced...
A new program called... **[5 Project]**
Every Congregation Visit Project.
Which is just what it sounds like.
The ministers of the Office of the Bishop...
Are going to visit every congregation...
Of the Rocky Mountain Synod...
Within the next two years.

The rep... will come to worship with us...
And hang out for fellowship...
And then... have a time set aside...
To listen to us.
To learn who we are.
To see what ministry we are doing...
Here at Joy.

That makes my heart sing.

Because... I was afraid they didn't care.
I was afraid they didn't want to know.
I was afraid they were so busy...
Doing their own thing...
That they were becoming more and more...
Disconnected from the congregations...

See. I was afraid.

The other program that is coming down the line... **[6 Second Fruits]**
Is called Second Fruits.
This addresses a HUGE fear of mine.
That the synod was misusing the resources of the church.

See... this is about money...
From former ministries...
From property sales...
Like when a church closes...
Or former capital campaigns...
Or big designated gifts...

Taking all those things...
That have been given to the synod...
In good faith...

And NOT using them...

For the operating expenses of the synod...

But instead...

For the ministry and the work...

Of the churches of the synod...

The work of the people...

Because this is our synod... right?

We are talking 1.97 million dollars...

That's not chump change.

It's a significant amount of money...

That WE all can use... to do ministry...

In the world around us.

And again. My heart sings.

Because... I was afraid...

Because I witnessed... the synod selling buildings and resources...

To meet the demands...

To fill the gaps...

Of the regular budget.

Well...they're not doing that anymore.

I was afraid... they we not being faithful...

With the resources we have been given.

I was afraid... they were disconnected...

From the work of the churches.

See. I was afraid. Again.

And my fear... caused my bad attitude.

So... all that I'm saying is...

There is life happening...

In the synod.

There is good happening...

Through the work of good people...

Who are committed to the mission...

We share in Christ.

The synod is working hard...

To proclaim the gospel.

And to bring life...

To a hurting and broken world.

And you know what gets in the way...

Of doing good and working together...

And being the church...

In strong and powerful ways...

Fear. Every time... fear.

It's interesting to me... **[7 Scary]**
That Jesus said three scary words...
In the gospel lesson we have today.
Thief, Bandit, and Stranger.

Jesus is emphasizing that there is a difference...
Between who he is...
And what he has to offer...

And the other people...
The other forces...
Who have questionable motivations...
When it comes to...
The well-being of the sheep.

They don't care.
They just want to take the sheep.
They just want to steal the sheep.

I don't know why...
Maybe they like lamb chops...
Maybe they want to steal the potential resources...
Shear their wool...
Squeeze the lanolin...
Take their lives.

Whatever the case...
He says... they don't really care...
They are not the gate.
They are not the way...
That leads to life.

Then he says...
I'm the gate...
I'm the shepherd.
I'm the one who knows the sheep by name.
I lead them out and bring them back again.
I will save them.

And the result is...
They will have life...
And have it abundantly.

I saw a saying the other day... **[8 Fear]**
That says... fear does not stop death...
Fear stops life.

Or Mark Twain said... **[9 Mark Twain]**
The fear of death follows...
From the fear of life.
The man who lives fully...
Is prepared to die...
At any time.

And in my opinion...
The fear of death...
Is what motivates...
Most of our negative behavior.

Like battling aging...
And the whole industry...
That has been built up around...
Making us afraid of getting old.

Or the fear of lack of significance...
Like I don't have a purpose in this world...
My life has no meaning.

Or the fear of connection...
I don't have anyone who loves me...
Or whom I can love.

Or the fear of others...
They might hurt me.

Fear of death...
Leads to more death.
It immobilizes us...
It cause us to do irrational things.
It hurts us all.

In our funeral service liturgy... **[10 Romans]**
We proclaim at the beginning of the service...
From the back of the church...
Standing right by the baptismal font...
We quote... Romans 6:3-4.

When we were baptized in Christ Jesus,
We were baptized into his death.
We were buried therefore with him
By baptism into death

So that as Christ was raised from the dead
By the glory of the Father,
We too might live a new life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his,
We shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

This was the Bible verse Bishop Aelabouni used...
For her bible study the first day of the Assembly.

And she was saying...
How we have been baptized into Jesus' death.
And therefore... just as he was raised from the dead.
We too are raised.

But not just at the end time...
Not when we go to heaven...
And everything is good and perfect...

But right now.
We are baptized into his death...
With the assurance... that he is with us...
In our death... when we face death...
Against all the powers of this world...
That try to steal our lives.

We have the life of Christ in us.
And that life... is more powerful...
Than death, the devil, sin...
It is more powerful...
Than anything...
That would threaten to take us away from Christ.

Now when she was talking... all I kept thinking was... **[11 Immunization]**
It's like the immunization I got last week.
Went to the doctor for a regular check up...
And the medical assistant said...
You're of the age now...
That you need to get the pneumonia shot.

I said... fine.
Which arm?... she asked...
I said... I don't care...
Give me the shot...
I'm not a sissy.

Well. I am a sissy.
The shot didn't hurt in the moment...
But for four days after the shot...
My arm ached.

It didn't help that friends from church...
Kept punching me in the arm...

Anyway. It hurt.
But it's worth it. You know why?
I don't want to get pneumonia.

And in the same way...
Being baptized in Christ...
Works in us... right now...
To fight the powers of death... and fear...
That would love to immobilize us... divide us...
And even destroy us.

We have been given the booster shot... of life.
Life is coursing through our veins.

And it's not our life...
Its his life. It's God's life.
It's life with a capital L... **[12 Easter People]**

We are filled with life.
We are Easter people...
He is risen...

We are still in the season of Easter.
Which means... we should be declaring...
VICTORY... over the power of death...

We should be telling...
The forces of fear...
And the fear mongers...
Of this world...

That you do not have power over me.

You do not get to define...
Who I am.
You do not get to define...
How I live my life.

You can not make me live in fear.

I belong to Jesus.
He is my shepherd.
He has opened the gate for me.
He has called me by name.
I hear his voice...
He has told me the way to go.
And HE has given me life.
Even in the face of death.

Therefore I will not be afraid.

You can't have my life.
I belong to Christ.

And he came...
To give me life...
To give us life...
So that...
We can have it abundantly.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

