

Noah was getting pretty excited. School would be out for the summer in just a few short weeks – and this summer was going to be like no other! Because this summer, Noah was going to Texas to spend two weeks with his uncle Carl on his ranch.

Noah's uncle raised sheep – and Noah had lots of questions about sheep. Finally after his older brother's Confirmation, and his younger cousin's 1st Communion, and after helping his dad cook breakfast for his mom on Mother's Day --- the day arrived – school was out -- and off to Texas Noah went.

Uncle Carl wasted no time in getting Noah acquainted with the sheep: The ewes – those are the momma sheep. The rams – those are the daddy sheep. And the lambs – those are the baby sheep. And boy, did Uncle Carl have a lot of each – especially the lambs --- who were all just born in the spring.

“Did you know there are more sheep in Texas than any place else in the United States?” asked Uncle Carl. “Most all sheep are in the western states,” he said. “Like Wyoming, and Montana, and Oregon. Although you can find some closer to you in Iowa. And maybe just down the street from you on Golden Belt Road!”

“But what good are they,” Noah said. “You can't ride them.” “Oh, you could if you wanted to,” uncle Carl said. “But I would recommend you stay away from the rams. . .” “People have been raising sheep for thousands of years. In fact, raising sheep is the oldest organized industry in the world. People first learned how to spin wool from sheep into cloth over 5,000 years ago!

“ You can get meat from a sheep, which is called mutton. You can still make clothes from their wool. And you can also make things like soap, and glue, and candles from sheep – even the strings of tennis rackets!” “Wow, that's a lot of stuff!” Noah said. “I guess sheep are more useful than I thought. . .”

The biggest and most important questions Noah had for his uncle came from his time spent in Church and at PSR, that is his parish school of religion, in his Catholic church.

“Why did Jesus like sheep so much – and talk about them all the time – like him being the good shepherd – or sometimes we sing a song about being the sheep of his flock. . .

Why did Jesus not talk about cheetahs or horses, or even elephants – you know, something with a bit of flair – a little class?”

“Oh, you're going right to the good stuff,” Uncle Carl laughed.” “Let me try to unpack all of that for you.”

“1st,” he said, “Sheep are very social creatures. They live together in a group called a flock.

You hardly ever find anyone with a single sheep – like you would a farmer with just one cow, or maybe just a pig.

“And Jesus wants us to know that as Christians – we have to be social creatures to. That's why we come together to pray and celebrate on the weekends.

That's why we take up collections sometimes to help people half-way around the world – because we are in this together: we are the flock of the lord!

“We are at our best as followers of Jesus when we are not alone – but all working together to establish God's kingdom.”

“Hmmm,” was all Noah managed to say.

But then quickly thought – “why does Jesus call himself the good shepherd – is there such a thing as a bad shepherd?”

“You better believe it,” said uncle Carl. “Not only are sheep very social creatures – their favorite game is follow the leader!

Since they aren't too independent, they tend to do what those around them are doing – so if one gets in trouble – usually the whole flock gets in trouble.

“So a flock of sheep needs a good leader – a good shepherd, who watches over them and keeps them from getting in trouble.

One who protects them by sometimes laying down beside them at night – acting like a gate to keep harmful animals away from them.

And sometimes leading them not to running water – but still waters, so they can drink their fill.

“A bad shepherd would just take a nap, or watch the clouds in the sky, text their friends, or play a video game – not paying much attention to those entrusted to their care – and before you know it – the whole flock would be in trouble. You certainly never get into trouble, do you Noah?”

“Hmmm,” was all Noah managed to say.” But then quickly thought, “why does Jesus say that the sheep hear his voice? Do shepherds talk to sheep?”

“That’s an excellent question bright nephew of mine! You see, no pun intended – sheep have very poor eyesight – but they have an excellent sense of hearing.

The momma sheep [and what are they called – ewes] are very caring mothers and form deep bonds with their children [and what are the babies called – lambs].

And the lambs can recognize their mothers by their call [and what does a sheep sound like – bah!] so when a lamb wanders too far away – the mother calls [how?] – and the lamb comes back to her.

Sheep also learn the voice of their shepherd calling out to them to lead and guide them – again, keeping them out of trouble.

“So as Christians, we need to get to know the voice of Jesus – so if we wander too far away – Jesus can call us back. That would never happened to you, would it Noah?”

And guess what Noah said? [Hmmm] Yes, hmmm, was all he managed to say.

But of course quickly added: “And why do we often see pictures of Jesus with a lamb across his shoulders?”

“Another excellent question nephew! You see sometimes you just have that occasional lamb who always wants to get in trouble – always running away – always getting into mischief – who never wants to listen. Definitely not like anyone I know” said Uncle Carl with a laugh. . .

So sometimes a shepherd, a good shepherd – who wants to protect all the sheep – will carry a trouble making lamb on their shoulders for hours or days at a time.

“That way that little lamb gets very accustomed to not only the sound of the shepherd’s voice – but also the scent of the shepherd. It is a bonding experience between the two – a way of really getting to know each other --- so hopefully the problem of wandering away takes care of itself.”

“Wow, this is just my first day – and I have already learned so much about sheep!” Noah said. “How about if I try riding one now?” “Be my guest,” Uncle Carl said. “Just don’t hurt yourself – or any of my little lambs! And remember, stay away from the rams!”

The two weeks on the ranch went by very quickly for Noah. And before you know it – he was back home and could not wait to get to the library to check out a few books to learn even more about sheep! And to continue figuring out why Jesus liked sheep--- better than cheetahs!