

Trinity, Waukesha, WI ~ Pastor Jay Zahn ~ Numbers 27:15-23 ~ June 13-14, 2026

Theme: The Shepherd Who Leads You Home

Have you ever found yourself somewhere completely unfamiliar and suddenly realized the person leading the way was gone? Maybe the GPS lost signal. Maybe you took a wrong turn. Maybe the guide got separated from the group.

In an instant, confidence evaporates. You start looking for someone, anyone, who knows where they're going. That is where the people of Israel find themselves in Numbers 27.

The Israelites are camped on the edge of the Promised Land. After forty years in the wilderness, their promised land, Canaan, is finally in sight. But Moses, the man who led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and to Mount Sinai, through the wilderness is about to die. He will not lead the people into their Promised Land on the other side of the Jordan River.

In light of that, Moses does something remarkable. He doesn't argue for himself. He prays for the people. He says: ***“May the LORD, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community... so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.”***

There are many things to say about that short prayer. First, notice how Moses addresses God. He calls him ***“the God who gives breath to all living things.”*** God knows every life because he created every life. He knows every fear, every weakness, every need. The One who appoints the shepherd is the One who knows the sheep.

That truth comforts us even before we hear God's answer. That truth assures us that God is not distant from his people. He knows exactly what they need. He knows exactly what you need.

That truth also clarifies the question before us today: Who is leading your life, and can that person actually lead you were God would have you go?

Because that is Moses' concern. Not merely that Israel have a leader. Not merely that they have a guide. But that they not be left as sheep without a shepherd.

Today we confess: Jesus leads me. That confession is too important to keep to ourselves. When someone finds a guide who truly knows God's way, they tell others. Throughout this sermon we'll see why God's people can say with confidence, "Jesus leads me," and why that is a message worth sharing.

Start here: **God always provides a shepherd for his people.** That was true for Israel. Moses asks God to appoint someone who will ***“go out and come in before them.”*** He isn't asking for a manager. He's asking for a shepherd, someone who walks with the people, leads them, and cares for them.

God answers Moses' prayer immediately: "**Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit.**" Joshua is God's chosen leader. Even his name is significant. Joshua (Hebrew: Yehoshua) means "The LORD saves." Do you know what name in the Greek language means the same thing? Jesus! Joshua and Jesus share the same name: "The LORD saves." Joshua led God's people across the Jordan into an earthly inheritance. The greater Joshua leads God's people through death itself into an eternal inheritance.

To get where God would have them go, God's people need a shepherd. God always provides one. Joshua's installation into this office of the shepherd of the people of Israel is public. Moses lays his hands on Joshua before the whole congregation. God wants his people to know: they are not abandoned.

The congregation sees God's answer to Moses' prayer with their own eyes. God could have quietly told Moses who would lead next. Instead, he gathers the people. He places Joshua before Eleazar, the high priest; before Moses, who had led them for 4 decades; before the whole Israelite community. Yes, God wanted his people to see his promise with their own eyes.

Imagine standing there in Israel's camp. Moses is about to die. The wilderness generation has experienced failure, judgment, and uncertainty. What comes next? God answers those fears publicly. He doesn't whisper his promise in a corner. He announces it before the whole assembly: "*I will not leave my people shepherdless.*"

That is how God works. He gives public promises for anxious sinners. Ultimately this points us to something even bigger than just what is happening here. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Joshua's work was never the final answer. Hebrews 4 says, "**If Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.**" Joshua brought Israel into Canaan. He could not bring them into heaven. The earthly Promised Land pointed to a greater one, just as Joshua points to the perfect Shepherd of God's people.

Joshua had the Spirit by God's gift. Jesus possesses the Spirit without measure. Joshua had to inquire of the Lord. Jesus is the eternal Son who perfectly knows the Father's will. Joshua points forward. Jesus fulfills.

Moses could not bring the people into God's promised earthly rest. Joshua could not bring the people into God's promised heavenly rest. The Law cannot bring us into God's promised spiritual and eternal rest. Only Jesus can. That is why Jesus says: "**I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.**"

God did not leave Israel without a shepherd. And he has not left you without one either.

That is such a comforting truth. But that truth also reveals this hard reality: the very thing that makes God's provision so necessary also indicts us. Because the reason Israel needed a shepherd in the first place is the same reason we do. Isaiah names it when he writes: "**We all,**

like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to our own way.” That is our problem. Not simply that we get lost. We choose our own direction.

Sometimes we place our confidence in human leaders, institutions, politics, or financial security. When those things falter or fail, fear takes over because we have trusted them more than God.

But there is an even deeper problem even deeper inside of us. We want control. We want to believe that with enough wisdom, enough effort, enough planning, we can navigate life on our own. We tell ourselves we don't really need a shepherd. We have this under control.

I know that temptation personally. One time in particular stands out. It was a stretch of time, harder than I want to admit, when I carried something I should have brought to God for months before I actually did. I kept telling myself I had it handled. That I could figure it out. Looking back, I wasn't demonstrating faith. I was acting like Joshua without the Urim, trying to lead without first seeking the Lord.

God's Law exposes that tendency in all of us. Moses himself could not enter the Promised Land. Not because God failed him. Not because Moses lacked importance. But because no human effort can overcome the barrier sin creates between us and God.

God's Law is holy and good. It shows us God's will. But it cannot save us. It can point the way. It cannot carry us there.

If your hope rests in your morality, your accomplishments, your religious performance, or your ability to make good decisions, then ultimately you are trying to lead yourself. Sheep that lead themselves eventually become lost.

Imagine a flock separated from its shepherd in unfamiliar wilderness. Every direction looks promising at first. One path leads toward a pack of wolves. Another toward a cliff. Another to a raging river. The sheep cannot see the dangers ahead because sheep were never meant to lead themselves.

Yet, that is exactly what sin tries to convince us to do. To find our own way. To wander from the Shepherd, trusting our own instincts instead.

Still God is good. Out of pure grace, he does not leave us lost. He provided Joshua for Israel. In the fullness of time he provided the One that Joshua foreshadowed. Jesus Christ. Jesus did not simply come to show the way. He came to be the way. ***“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*** (John 14)

Jesus became the way by taking away all that was getting in the way between us and God, between us and the inheritance God promises. Isaiah describes it this way: ***“The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*** All our wandering. All our rebellion. All our attempts to lead ourselves. All our sins. God laid them on Christ. Jesus carried them to the cross.

In return Jesus gives us his righteousness, his forgiveness, and his life. Where Moses failed, Jesus succeeds. Where human leaders falter, Jesus remains faithful. Where we wander, Jesus seeks. The Good Shepherd does not wait for lost sheep to find their own way home. He goes after them. He lays down his life for them. He carries them on his shoulders rejoicing. This is what makes Jesus different. He does not merely point toward safety. He enters danger himself. He walks through death itself. Then, three days later, he walks out of his own grave, alive again. The risen Shepherd now leads his people, leads us, you and me, personally and faithfully toward eternal life.

Think instead of a sheep that has wandered from the flock. It is disoriented, exhausted, and unable to find its way back.

Then the shepherd comes looking for it. He knows every danger. He knows every path. He knows exactly where the sheep has wandered. He does not stand at a distance and shout directions. He comes to the sheep. He lifts it up. He carries it home.

That is what Jesus has done for us. Jesus never promised an easy path through life. He promised his presence with us every step of the way.

Maybe you are walking a path that feels dark and lonely right now. Grief. Illness. Uncertainty. Disappointment. You would not have chosen this road. Yet the Shepherd who walked through death itself knows every valley. Even when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you do not walk alone. The Shepherd is with you. He has already walked that path and emerged victorious.

Jesus' presence changes everything. Not because life becomes easy. But because the One leading you has conquered death. You are not sheep without a shepherd. You belong to Jesus.

How does that change the way you walk through life? What does it look like to live as a sheep of the Good Shepherd in daily life? Here are three things that change for you.

First, the Shepherd still speaks. He speaks through his Word. He speaks through preaching. He comes to us through Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are not merely religious activities. They are the means through which Christ continues to speak to and lead his people today.

Sheep learn the Shepherd's voice by hearing it. They do not learn it by wandering farther from the flock. They learn it by staying near the Shepherd and listening. That is why Christ gathers us around his Word, Baptism, and Supper. There the Shepherd still speaks.

Second, you aren't on this journey alone. Notice that Moses prayed for a shepherd for the people. God gathers sheep into a flock. Christianity was never meant to be lived in isolation. We need fellow believers who encourage us, pray for us, and help carry our burdens.

When sheep wander alone, they become vulnerable. When they remain with the flock, they are strengthened. If you have been drifting to the edges, hear the Shepherd's invitation to return, to draw nearer to him and closer to one another.

Third, you are where you are to help those who don't know where they are going. Think about everything we've seen today. God refused to leave Israel shepherdless. God refused to leave us shepherdless. He gave us Christ. In light of that truth, notice the people around you who need to hear of him.

How many people around you are wandering like sheep without a shepherd? They may look successful. They may appear confident. Yet they are carrying burdens they cannot remove and searching for peace they cannot find.

You know the Shepherd. You know his voice. You know where he can be found.

When you speak to them about Christ, you are not selling a religion. You are helping lost sheep hear the Good Shepherd calling them home.

God leads others through the witness of his people.

Moses prayed this for the people of Israel: ***“Do not leave your people as sheep without a shepherd.”*** God's answer was greater than Joshua. Greater than Canaan. Greater than any earthly leader. God sent Jesus. Your greater Joshua. The Good Shepherd. He has defeated sin. He has conquered death. He has forgiven every one of your sins. He has paid the price for everyone's sins.

Right now you know the comfort, the peace, and the purpose that comes from following this Shepherd, the One who is leading you, personally, patiently, faithfully, toward the eternal rest he has prepared for you.

There are so many others who don't know that, even as they long for it in the deepest parts of themselves. God publicly assured Israel that they had not been abandoned. Today he publicly assures you through the Gospel that you have not been abandoned either. You have a Shepherd. You have a Savior. You have a home.

That is news too good to keep to yourself. So say it out loud! Share it with all who need to hear. Amen.