

March 15, Lent 4A (Psalm 23; John 9:1–41)

## **Psalm 23 isn't just a song of comfort and consolation. It's also about heroism and the world set to rights.**

by [Erica MacCreaigh](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

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Whenever Psalm 23 comes up in the lectionary, I remember a canoe trip on a long, flat stretch of the Yampa River in northern Colorado. That's ranching country, so we'd seen a lot of livestock on the river banks, which were mostly a good ten feet higher than the water itself. I sensed vague disapproval from the cattle perched on those high banks surveying two dozen sunburned, bug-bitten paddlers. The sheep staring at us just seemed puzzled.

That impression held when, rounding a river bend, we encountered six sheep huddled on a narrow strip of muddy sand. The bank towered over them, and it didn't take long to figure out what had happened. Conveniently enough, another sheep demonstrated it for us. No doubt responding to his flock's pitiful predicament, he took two steps down a steep slick slope, started sliding, then jumped the remaining five feet to the increasingly crowded piece of sodden real estate at river's edge.

I've read about sheep over the years, and they're not actually as dumb as their reputation suggests. But they do seem to be eager followers and poor decision-makers, so it's not surprising they are such a common metaphor for human beings.

The 23rd Psalm is standard pastoral and funeral fare for good reason. We easily identify ourselves as sheep in God's tender, watchful care. The psalm's Edenic setting and descriptions of table fellowship and reconciliation restore the world-weary soul.

But I suggest we think as well about the flip side of Psalm 23, the heroic side. Because Psalm 23 isn't just a song of comfort and consolation. It's also about heroism and the world set to rights. To appreciate this, we need to consider the nature of true heroism.

A study several years ago asked what makes a person put their life on the line for a stranger, which is different from the deeply instinctual impulse to protect loved ones. The study found that people willing to put themselves in danger for people they don't know possess two traits in abundance: risk tolerance and compassion.

One afternoon in 2009, having already accompanied six novice jumpers safely earthward, skydiving instructor Dave Hartsock agreed to take just one more before clocking out for the day. It was Shirley Dygert's first-ever jump. Strapped together, with Shirley's head cradled against Dave's shoulder to avoid whiplash, they exited the plane and began their descent.

Skydiving enthusiasts can read the *Sports Illustrated* article (July 28, 2014) for a technical analysis of what went wrong that day. Suffice it to say that neither the main parachute nor the reserve one deployed correctly. With seconds to spare before hitting the ground at terminal velocity, Dave twisted in the air, placing his body between Shirley's and the ground.

Both survived. Shirley walked out of the hospital three days later. Dave never walked again.

Psalm 23 resounds with confidence about our safekeeping, but it's not the green pastures and still waters that ensure that. A courageous shepherd does. The powerful imagery of the shepherd's rod and staff goes over most heads these days. Shepherds use the crook of the staff to pull wayward sheep to safety. They use both rod and staff to gently prod sheep in the right direction. And both can be used as weapons against predators.

The shepherd who willingly enters dangerous territory armed for guidance and defense is a hero on par with Christ himself. In this week's gospel lesson, we see the sixth of his seven signs in John. In conversation with Psalm 23, Jesus' signs are not simply divine illumination for his scattered and lost people; they also put his opponents on notice. The shepherd is here, and the sheep are listening. The wolves are gathering to bring him down, but this shepherd has a lion's heart.

Watch for this in next week's gospel reading, when Jesus leaves a position of relative safety to raise Lazarus; during the long final showdown during Holy Week; and on Good Friday, when Jesus confronts humankind's most intractable enemies—death and the grave—with an entire arsenal of divine light and life.

Lest we think that heroism is one-size-fits-all, it's worth noting that heroes risk things besides life and limb, and every gift of compassion matters. That day on the Yampa, most of us parked our boats on the other side of the river and comfortably watched five people with canoe paddles hack a 45-degree path from the river bank to the river's edge. More than one lost their footing during the process and took a slimy slide to the sheep poop-covered landing.

An hour later, seven harried and rather ungrateful sheep took turns bolting up the ramp, their mud-caked backsides the last we saw of them. And five filthy, thirsty paddlers returned to their boats to resounding applause, having given the rest of us something to write home about.