

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 3  
June 14, 2026  
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz  
***Sheep need a shepherd***

—Numbers 27:15-23

How long should it take to travel from northern Egypt to the land of Israel? In a modern vehicle today it's about a 12-hour drive, mostly because there's no direct route. In ancient times, a camel caravan transporting goods for trade would make the trip in about two weeks. It took the Children of Israel 40 years.

Why so long? The simple answer: God is serious about sin. That time wandering in the desert was God's punishment upon the nation for their rebellion and unbelief. God brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, and God showed them powerful miracles, signs and wonders. He parted the Red Sea for them to cross through on dry land. He destroyed Pharaoh's army. He led them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. But still they refused to trust him. At Mount Sinai the people saw the glory of the LORD descend upon the mountain. But still they refused to trust him. God fought for them in battle, and they defeated their enemies. But still they refused to trust him. God said, "I will give you the Promised Land. Just follow me and trust me." But they refused to trust him. Finally, God said, "Fine. I'll give you what you want. You want to rely upon yourselves, and you refuse to trust me, you can wander out here in the barren wilderness for forty years, and I'll lead the next generation into the Promised Land." And that's exactly what happened.

Then, not even Moses got to enter the Promised Land. Why? Because in his impatience with the rebellious and stiff-necked people, even he rebelled against God. At a certain place where the people needed water, God told Moses to speak to a rock, and water would flow. Instead, Moses took his staff and whacked the rock and said, "Listen, now, you rebels! Must we bring water out of this rock for you?" (Numbers 20:10). And God said, "You didn't trust me or honor me as holy, therefore you will not lead the people into the land" (Numbers 20:12).

In our sermon text today, we're at the end of those forty years. Moses' brother Aaron has died. His sister Miriam has died. Soon it will be time for Moses to die. But before the LORD takes Moses home to heaven, he appoints the man who will be Moses' successor. After Moses is gone, Joshua will lead God's people into the Promised Land. So why do we care about the succession plan from Moses to Joshua almost 3,500 years ago? Because this little section from God's Word teaches us some important truths about how God still leads us today, especially how he leads us through the wilderness of this life into the Promised Land of heaven.

Sheep need a shepherd. In the Old Testament God appointed judges and kings and priests to shepherd his people. In the New Testament he sent Jesus as our priest and king to be our Good Shepherd to shepherd his people. And today Jesus gives us pastors to shepherd his flock. In Ephesians 4, Scripture says, "It was [Jesus] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to equip God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ might be built up" (Eph. 4:11,12).

But how does God provide shepherds for his flock? The first thing we notice in Number 27 is that there is an orderly plan. God is not a God of disorder or chaos but of peace. Joshua didn't jump up and down and say, "I'm going to be Israel's next leader!" No, God was the one who appointed Joshua to follow Moses. *The Lord said to Moses, "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and place your hand on him. 22 Moses did just as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand in front of Eleazar the priest and the entire community. 23 He placed his hands on him and commissioned him, just as the Lord spoke through Moses.* Joshua was installed into his office, so that everyone knew that he was the one who had been given authority from God. He didn't take authority for himself; it was given to him. Whether it was leaders like Joshua or priests in the priesthood, Hebrews 5 says, "No one takes this honor upon himself. He must be called by God."

That call is not some inner feeling or a burning in the bosom that makes someone say, "I think I'll be a pastor or a leader today!" This is a very important point to emphasize today in a world where we are surrounded by plenty of people who wake up and think, "I think I'll start my own church," or "I think I'll get an online diploma and become a pastor today." The *desire* to serve is not the same as the *call* to serve. A call from God is conferred upon someone publicly through Christ's Church in the sight of witnesses through the laying on of hands. People have often asked me, "When did you feel the call to be a pastor?" Well, when I was younger I thought about being a pastor and wanted to be a pastor, but I was *called* to be a pastor on Call Day at the seminary, and Trinity Lutheran Church in Waukesha, Wisconsin, called me to serve as their pastor. Can you imagine how ridiculous it would be if someone woke up one day and decided, "I'm going to be a policeman today!" because that's what they *feel* like doing? They would get tossed in jail for impersonating an officer! You can't just usurp authority for yourself; it must be conferred. But it's not uncommon today for someone to think they can serve in the Holy Ministry just because they feel like it.

So let's make a practical application to our congregation and our pastors. None of your pastors here at Emmanuel just showed up here one day and said, "Here I am! I'll be your pastor!" No, the Lord worked through you, the congregation, to call each of us to serve you as pastor. And then we were publicly installed, so that everyone could know publicly that this ministry wasn't something we chose for ourselves. Our new pastor (right now we can call him Candidate Gensmer, because he is a candidate for the Holy Ministry) isn't just going to show up one day in July and say, "This looks like a nice, warm place to live in the winter, I'll be your pastor." No, he's coming because we have called him, and he will be publicly ordained and installed on July 19, and then he will serve here as another shepherd under Jesus.

That brings us to another lesson we can learn from Moses passing the torch to Joshua: Leadership of God's people means exercising authority received from God. The LORD said to Moses, "*Have [Joshua] stand in front of Eleazar the priest and the entire community. You will commission him in their sight. You will give some of your authority to him so that the entire Israelite community will listen to him.*" Across America we have all kinds of notions about what a pastor is to be and what role he is to serve. Pastors are viewed as life coaches and encouragers and role models and counselors and project managers—and these can all be important tasks, but they are not at the heart and core of the ministry. When it comes down to it, the call of a pastor comes down to one thing: The ministry of the gospel. That means preaching and teaching the Word of God, serving God's people with the sacraments, applying the authority of the Ministry of the Keys, praying for God's people. It all comes down to serving God's people with the gospel.

Preaching the gospel means pointing people to Jesus, who shed his blood and gave his life for our sins. It means proclaiming the Good News that our sins have been paid for, death has been defeated, Satan has been conquered, and Jesus is our Righteousness. Administering the sacraments means baptizing in the name of the Triune God, so that through water and the Word little children or grown adults are born again, receive the Holy Spirit, and are brought into God's family. It means serving the body and blood of Jesus, under the bread and the wine of Holy Communion, for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith. Applying the Keys is using the authority Jesus gave his church to lock or to unlock the gate to heaven. When a person is impenitent and refuses to turn away from their sin, it is the pastor's responsibility to say, "Your sins are not forgiven. Repent!" And when a person is brokenhearted and sorry for their sin, it is the pastor's privilege to say, "Your sins are forgiven. Be at peace!" Either of those declarations is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us himself.

Sheep need a shepherd. That means sheep need to be part of a flock. Here on earth we are part of a congregation of believers, and we have a shepherd or shepherds working under Jesus to take care of his flock. Again, in modern America, people have all kinds of interesting notions about church membership. They think being a member of a church is like being a member at Costco or a member at a fitness club—pay your dues, go if you feel like it, let your membership lapse if you don't feel like it. Shop at a store that's convenient for you, work out at the fitness club if you're in the mood, otherwise don't. But that's not the way the Christian Church works. Christians are part of a flock of Christ's sheep with shepherds to care for them. Your pastors are called to feed the flock with a pure diet of God's Word, Law and Gospel applied properly. That means feeding and caring for the sheep. Sheep that aren't fed regularly starve; Christians who aren't fed with God's Word and Sacrament starve spiritually, shrivel up and die.

Bear with a little mixed-animal analogy. Out our back window at home we often see coyotes walking around—sometimes whole families of coyotes, pups and all. Other days we look out and see rabbits hopping and scurrying around. What we never see is coyotes and rabbits together. Why? Because coyotes eat rabbits! What happens to sheep among predatory wolves? Sheep that wander from the flock become easy prey for Satan and his minions, who pick them off one by one and devour their souls. Sheep need a shepherd to ward off predators, and sheep need a flock. Outside the flock of Christ there is death and damnation. In the church there is life and health, forgiveness and salvation.

Brothers and sisters, it is a tremendous privilege to serve as your pastor, to serve you with the Means of Grace. All of our pastors here—Pastor Pautz and Pastor Pufahl and myself—would say the same thing: what a blessing the Lord has given us! To be able to comfort and encourage a troubled and guilt-burdened soul with the forgiveness of sins. To be able to lift up the grieving heart of someone who has lost a loved one with the promise of a joyful reunion in heaven. To be able to hold the hand of a person who is about to enter eternity and meet Jesus. These are privileged tasks that you have called us to carry out in Jesus' name.

Sheep need a shepherd because God is still serious about sin and because God is still serious about grace. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field. Amen.