

Shepherd Incarnate

John 10:11-14, Psalm 23, & others

December 17, 2017



When I envision a shepherd, I tend to picture him with his staff carrying the sheep on over his shoulders. And that's probably an accurate way to imagine what is probably a fairly common scene for shepherds. But our choir sang a song portraying a different picture. They sang the words "In His arms He'll hold them close to His heart." This resonates with what is written in Isaiah 40:10-11, "See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." What a fascinating mix of great power and tender gentleness. This image reveals something more than just a convenient piggy back ride. This is really more of an embrace where the sheep can literally feel the good shepherd's heart beating in his chest. The sheep can feel his arms wrapped around him. There's a security and a strength to this image. There's a greater intimacy to it. I wonder, how many of us reading this sermon truly experience this kind of tenderness and closeness with the powerful God of Heaven? That would be my desire and prayer for each one of us. For, this is indeed how our God reveals Himself to us.

In John 10:11-14 Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me." To know God and to be known BY Him. What an awesome idea. What a joyful reality this would be for us as human beings. But, is it real? Is this truly attainable? Or, is this just something nice to say, interesting to talk about, and beautiful to sing about? Let's dig into this shepherd idea a bit more. Now, I've never been a shepherd. So, I did a little research...

What are shepherds like? A shepherd is simply someone who tends a flock of sheep. The Bible makes frequent references to shepherds. As early back at Genesis 4:2 we find Abel described as a shepherd. We then see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all of Jacob's sons identified as shepherds.¹ King David was also a shepherd as were many other people. A shepherd led the flock, protected it, and went off searching even if just one sheep wandered away. Frankly, in order to do this job well, a shepherd had to live out among the sheep. He wasn't driving around in some kind of enclosed jeep or sitting in a press box watching from afar, he was right there walking the peaks and valleys with the sheep. They were personally familiar with all of their habits and fears and even their quirks. The shepherd knew each sheep individually and they all knew his particular voice; they'd come running when he'd call out.² The only way that I could imagine a shepherd having a better understanding of the needs of sheep, would be for them to somehow supernaturally turn into a sheep themselves. Which is a crazy idea.

The Old Testament refers to God as the "Shepherd of Israel." For example, Psalm 80:1 begins, "Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who sit enthroned between the cherubim..." God's shepherd's heart is displayed in the words of Ezekiel 34:11-12, "For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them

¹ See *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 5, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p. 397.

² See notes on p. 388 under "sheepcote, sheepfold" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 5.

from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.” Matthew 2:6 actually bridges the Old Testament and the New Testament³ by quoting from the prophet Micah, “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” This promise is fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah.⁴

Perhaps a better question than “what are shepherds like,” would be “what are sheep like?” Well, sheep are prone to wander. That’s just what they do. At least, if they are not following a good shepherd they will. Sheep aren’t known for their intelligence. They’re known for their wool. Certain breeds can be good for their milk and cheese. Sheep were also used for their delicious meat.⁵ But, they’re not known for their wisdom or intelligence. Therefore, they need a good leader. A guide. They need a shepherd. In fact, they’re pretty lost without him. The shepherd is the one who knows where the green pasture lies.

Throughout the Bible, people are often referred to as “sheep without a shepherd.” Isaiah 53:6 says, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way....” Therefore, “God provided a shepherd in the person of his Son.”⁶ When Jesus sees sheep wandering around, he doesn’t react with impatience or disappointment: “Where are those sheep going now? Boy do they smell! Boy are they dumb!” No, Jesus responds with grace. Matthew 9:36 says, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

This is why the incarnation is so special. Hebrews 2:17 says this about Jesus, “For this reason he had to be made like them, **fully human in every way**, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”⁷ This incarnation reveals that Jesus is a shepherd who genuinely understands us. Jesus intimately and personally knows what it’s like to be human, because He became flesh by being born among us as a fully human child. In other words, Jesus is the only shepherd in history who actually lived the life of a sheep Himself. Our Cantata this morning began with songs about Light, Hope, Peace, and Love. And our world needs all 4 of these things. We need light because there are a lot of dark problems in this world. We need hope because life can get pretty discouraging and out of control without something solid to anchor to. We need peace because all the anxiety and stress in our lives becomes too overwhelming. Serious health problems or losing someone we love reveals our need for supernatural peace. And, we need love because there is far too much hatred in this world.

Right before Jesus announces that he is the Good Shepherd, He says this in John 10:10, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” I haven’t come for your wool. I haven’t come for your meat. I’ve come to bring you something; I’ve come to bring you life! Our Cantata will end with songs about Joy and Life. Earlier I mentioned the idea that we can know God and be known by Him. But then I asked, is this real; is this truly attainable? The answer is “yes, this is real.” The Bible reveals this awesome idea to us. This joyful reality for us as human beings is found as we put our faith in Jesus. We can join with the angels in rejoicing in the new life that He brings.

As we embrace our Shepherd Incarnate and trust Him to lead us, we will find the Joy and Life that He alone provides. There is so much for us as Christians for us to rejoice about. But if you’re not yet a Christian, you are missing out on this Joy and Life. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who laid His life

³ The New Testament continues with this shepherd idea as Hebrews 13:20 refers to Jesus as “that great Shepherd of the sheep.”

⁴ See Micah 5:1-4, esp. verses 2 & 4. Also consider 2 Samuel 5:1-2.

⁵ Of course, the Jews also used sheep extensively as part of the sacrificial system. In some cultures, sheep were also used for manuring pastures and treading in seed. See discussion in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 5, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p. 386

⁶ *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Ed. by Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1992, pp. 751-752.

⁷ See also Hebrews 4:14-16.

down for YOU. If you have not placed your faith in Jesus Christ, why not do that today? Get to know this amazing Savior and become known by Him.⁸

Admit that you've been wandering in sin.

Believe that Jesus came to earth as a human so that He could die for your sins on the cross.

Choose to begin following Jesus as the Good Shepherd of your life today.

This Christmas, let's rejoice in our Shepherd Incarnate. I know that we often tend to reserve Psalm 23 for times of grief. However, it's words are just as appropriate during this Christmas season. When we celebrate advent and Jesus coming to earth, part of what we celebrate is that our Good Shepherd has finally come. Jesus has come in this time of advent to draw near to us in a humble and approachable way, so that we can understand Him and embrace Him as the Leader of our lives. I invite you to read Psalm 23 out loud:

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever."⁹

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⁸ Consider Matthew 7:21-23, 25:12, and 25:31-46; Luke 13:22-30.

⁹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Ps 23:1-6). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.