

Jesus the Shepherd

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Matthew 2:6

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

God lifts up the lowly!

Do you enjoy eating humble pie? I don't, particularly. Horse/Pig, Christmas card for Connie, wrong sermon. "Never try to become a perfect pastor, they'll forget you're a real person."

God is the best at eating humble pie! The Lord of the Universe comes down to earth as a baby, is born in a "one-traffic-light town," to a peasant girl, who isn't yet married to a working-class carpenter. It is our Mighty God becoming the "least likely." The Light of the world is a baby in cloth diapers! The Savior of the world is sleeping in a feeding trough for cows and donkeys! God eating humble pie.

Seven hundred and fifty years before Jesus (about the same time as the great prophet Isaiah), a lesser-known prophet, Micah, foretells the birthplace of the Messiah. Micah's writing is full of gloom and doom. He anticipates the destruction of Jerusalem; he warns a sinful people of their sin, under the tight grip of an evil king (King Ahaz). But Micah's prophecy also points to hope and promise.

(Keep your Bible OPEN! Page #865) "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times" (5:2).

Jerusalem has its sprawling marketplaces, magnificent buildings and the great Temple. But the Messiah won't be born in Jerusalem. The Messiah will be born in the country village of Bethlehem—least and littlest among the clans of Judah! God eating humble pie. The "least of these" doing great things. Little Bethlehem is BIG in Israel's history: It is where Ruth (the widowed, Moabite foreigner) marries Boaz. And it's Ruth who gives birth to a son, Obed, the father of Jesse, who is the father of David (the runt of his 7 brothers, the little shepherd boy who stands up to the giant Goliath). It is the birthplace of that greatest of the kings of Israel, the "Shepherd-King," David. God, through Micah, is pointing to a "new David" (new Shepherd) from that same little birthplace.

And who are the first to hear the glorious news of a Savior born in a small town in a backyard stable? Those smelly, lonely, irreligious shepherds, tending their flocks on the surrounding hills. The shepherds were cut off from synagogue worship. They were deemed "ritually unclean" because they spent their time with animals. But the Angel comes to them first on that Silent Night, Holy Night. God cares for the least of these. God lifts up the lowly!

And that's the other verse in Micah's prophesy. The Messiah

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will be a shepherd to his flock. Most of us stop reading Micah after the birthplace prophecy. But just two verses further, Micah offers more hope and promise. “He (the Savior-Messiah) will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. He will be their peace”(5:4-5).

Fast forward, now, to the New Testament. Matthew tells his Gospel story centuries later and combines Micah’s two prophecies into one neatly summarized verse: “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 be the shepherd of my people Israel” (Matthew 2:6).

Through Micah, Matthew names where God is born as a child AND names who God will be when He grows up. The Savior-Child, born as a babe in Bethlehem, BECOMES Jesus the man from Nazareth in Galilee, who becomes the Savior-Shepherd for the world.

A Savior-Shepherd? Perhaps He is just whom you and I need at this holiday time. Christmas isn’t all that cheery or bright or happy for some of us. There are some of us undergoing chemotherapy, or fighting depression, or struggling in a difficult marriage or broken relationship, or grieving the death of a loved one, or out of work, or running out of money. We need a Savior-Shepherd this time of year.

The image of the Shepherd is utterly distinctive in ancient Palestine. There are qualities of the Shepherd found in no other ancient occupation—not king, not merchant, not farmer. Here is the shepherd, in William Barclay’s words:

“...sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, leaning on his staff, and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one of them on his heart, you understand why the shepherd of Judaea sprang to the front in his people’s history; why they gave his name to their king, and made him the symbol of providence; why Christ took him as the type of self-sacrifice.’ Constant vigilance, fearless courage, patient love for his flock, were the necessary characteristics of the shepherd.”

The Old Testament descriptions of God as Shepherd are rich and ripe. The Psalmist names God Almighty as the “Shepherd of Israel”(Psalm 80:1). And there is David’s Psalm, the “Shepherd’s Prayer” – Psalm 23. Jacob, in his late years, calls the Lord “the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day” (Genesis 48:14). The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah describe Yahweh as their “Shepherd God”(Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10). But the most eloquent account of the Shepherd God is found in Ezekiel—Jeremiah’s young protégé. Ezekiel’s chapter 34 (v.11-16) paints an exquisite picture.

Why do sheep need a shepherd? Because sheep, more than any other livestock, require endless attention and meticulous care (Keller). They are driven by distractions (flies and fleas and pests), they are timid and

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fearful, they are easy prey for predators, they are stubborn creatures of habit. You and I need a shepherd because, LIKE sheep, we are always hungry. We are constantly wandering off and getting into trouble because of our insatiable cravings.

“If you ask a sheep rancher how a sheep gets lost, chances are he’ll reply, ‘Well, it starts nibbling on a tuft of green grass, and when it finishes, it looks ahead to the next tuft of green grass and starts nibbling on that one, and then it nibbles on a tuft of grass right next to a hole in the fence. It then sees another tuft of grass on the other side of the fence, so it nibbles on that one and then goes on to the next one. The next thing you know, the sheep has nibbled itself into being lost.’” (From an unknown source.)

Jesus the Good Shepherd keeps us from straying. It is usually not the big decisions that get us into trouble. More often than not it is a sequence of seemingly harmless actions that eventually lead us into “rocky places.” Life-style decisions or habits may gradually damage our well-being. It can be very intoxicating to spend just a few more late hours on that project at work, thinking we are indispensable to its success. We can eat or drink ourselves into health risks by ignoring basic nutrition and exercise. Family members become estranged from one another because of minor arguments that never got resolved.

Our Shepherd God will always go after the one in 100 who is lost. The world discounts the one in 100. The world will play the numbers and ignore the one in 100. But the Shepherd goes out searching for you, no matter what the weather or terrain. He knows your name and hears your voice. Jesus goes out searching, and upon finding you, hoists you up in his arms, up on his shoulders, and He brings you home to safety and shelter.

Jesus the Good Shepherd cares for us. Occasionally, I get a bad sinus or bronchial infection. When I go to see the doctor, he doesn’t just sit across the room from me and ask a series of questions about how I feel. Rather, he looks in my ears, down my throat, and listens to my lungs. The Shepherd, like my doctor, gets personally involved in healing the sheep. God makes a thorough examination. He provides a treatment to bring us back to health. Now, not all of God’s sheep are physically healed. Some of them die. In those times of death, the Shepherd grieves with those left behind. God weeps with us when we lose a loved one because God loves each one of us as though we were the only sheep in His flock.

Jesus the Good Shepherd guides us. It is always startling to me how quickly Christmas disappears before our eyes. No hint of Christmas left in the stores; perhaps even in our homes. This Friday, the day after Christmas, the Washington Post was giving guidance on New Year’s Resolutions. But go, instead, to the

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Shepherd for guidance into the New Year. Go to the Shepherd for how to make the holiest and healthiest life you've ever had, for 2009! With His staff the Shepherd gets right in the middle of His flock. He guides the sheep through those times of uncertainty and fear. God is right at our side when we have a difficult decision to make. God is right at our side when we walk through a dark valley.

The Babe in Bethlehem grows up and becomes the Shepherd to His sheep. We like Jesus staying a baby, so tender and mild, in swaddling clothes. But we need Him to grow up and be our Shepherd. "I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says. The Shepherd delights in His flock. His very "Life" is seeing to it that his sheep are contented, well-fed, and flourishing under His care. He literally lays himself out for those he loves. The Good Shepherd will go to any length to shelter you from the storms. The Good Shepherd will go to any length to protect you from ruthless enemies. The Good Shepherd will go to any length to save you when you are lost. "Wherever (you) go I know God's Never-Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love will go (with you), too!" (Jesus' Storybook for Children). "I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says, and "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).