Sunday, December 22, 1985
JESUS: THE GOOD SHEPHERD (NO. 3 IN A SERIES)
Luke 2:8-14; John 10:14-18

At Christmas time we hear a lot about shepherds. According to Luke's Gospel, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the good news of the birth was given first to the shepherds who were keeping watch oven their flocks in a field near the manger.

And even before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah spoke of the Massiah being like a shepherd — "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." Remember that beautiful solo from Handel's Messiah?

As a young boy and young man, surely Jesus heard that passage read from Isaiah many times. I'm sure too that he knew the 23rd Psalm from memory—" The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies, thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Thus it is not surprising to find Jesus using the metaphor of the shepherd in describing himself. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus told his disciples. Later, after the resurrection, Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" When Peter replied that he did, Jesus used the metaphor of the shepherd again — he told Peter — "Feed my sheep."

This morning as we approach Christmas, let's look more closely at this metaphor of the shepherd which Jesus applied to himself to see what tells us about Jesus and his mission.

The picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one of the first pictures of Jesus presented to children. In an agricultural civilization and society, the picture is vivid and clear; but not so much so for most of us today. We do not see shepherds on the hillside, taking care of their sheep.

Yet when Jesus used the picture of the shepherd and the sheep, he used a picture which was woven into the thought and the language of the Jewish people. Again and again in the Old Testament God is pictured as the shepherd of people — not only in the familiar 23rd Psalm quoted earlier, but in many other places as well.

The 95th Psalm for example says: "For God is our God and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of God's hand."

In the prophet Ezekiel, the Messiah is described as a shepherd, and in Jeremiah the shepherd metaphor is used again — the Old Testament is full of the picture of the shepherd and the sheep.

Jesus took over the picture of the shepherd and made it the picture of himself. He is the shepherd who goes out to the mountains and the shepherd who goes out to the mountains and the hills, the valleys and the ravines, the cliffs and the crags to seek and find the sheep which

are lost. He is moved with compassion for the people because they are like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36; Mark 6:34).

The Picture reaches its most complete form in our scripture reading for this morning from the Gospel of John, where Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me … And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”

This metaphor of Jesus as the good shepherd passes into the language of the early church so that later in the New Testament the leaders of Christ’s people are likened to shepherds. In fact, the English word Pastor is nothing other than the Latin word for shepherd.

This morning let’s look more closely at Jesus as the Good Shepherd for it will tell us much about the nature of Jesus and about the nature of God as revealed in Jesus.

In Jeusu’ day, the shepherd’s equipment was simple. He had his scrip, which was a bag, made of the skin of an animal, and in it he carried his simple food — bread, dried fruit, olives, cheese. He had his sling. In Palestine, shepherds were skilled in the use of the sling, so that they could sling a stone at a small target and not miss. David in the Old Testament, before he was anointed King of Israel, was a shepherd boy who knew how to use the sling.

We remember the story of David and the giant Goliath and how David won that battle with his sling.

The shepherd in Jesus’ time had no dog to send after stray sheep. Rather he had his rod and his staff. The staff was a long stick with a crook on the end. Always the shepherd walked with it in his hand, and when a sheep strayed, he would stretch out and pull it back with the crook. He carried the rod at his belt. It was a stout piece of wood, perhaps three feet long, with a lump of wood the size of an orange at one end of it. With this the shepherd fought the battles of the flock, using it to drive off wild animals and to defend the flock against the robbers who would steal the sheep. The regular dress of the shepherd was a sheepskin robe with the fleece worn on the inside for the sake of warmth.

In Jesus’ time, and before, the shepherds were despised by the strictly orthodox religious people. Be the very nature of their calling, by the very demands that the continuous care of the flock made upon them, the shepherds could not observe all the complicated religious rules of handwashing and ceremonial cleansing. There were times when they could not even observe the stated hours of prayer. So the pious orthodox looked down on the shepherds. The shepherd, however, by the very nature of his work, lived in the wide open spaces, beneath the silent stars at night, close to the elements, in the midst of life and death and birth and peril, and therefore inevitably the shepherd lived close to God. The complicated ceremonies of religion may have been impossible, but the awareness of God was never far away.

Almost everything in the shepherd’s life and work illustrates the words of Jesus.

In the East in Jesus’ time, the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep was different from anything that we know in today’s world in the West. In the West, the sheep are mainly kept for slaughter; in the East they are kept for their milk and for their wool. Thus, in the east, the shepherd and sheep were together for as long as eight or nine years. The shepherd literally had a name for every sheep and sheep came to know their names.

In Palestine, the shepherd did not drive the sheep before him; he went in front of them, and they followed him. Often the shepherd had to lead his flock through narrow dark passages, which were excellent hiding places for wild animals and for thieves and robbers. At such a time, the shepherd would go first to make sure that it was safe for the sheep to follow. As the 23rd Psalm puts it, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

The Hebrew people have a beautiful legend to explain why Moses was chosen as the leader of the people of God. When Moses was a shepherd keeping sheep for his father-in-law in the wilderness, a young lamb ran away. Moses followed it until it reached a ravine, where it found a well from which to drink. When Moses came up to it, he said, “I did not know you ran away because you were thirsty. Now you must be weary.” So, he took the lamb on his shoulders and carried it back. Then God said, “Because you have shown pity in leading back one of a flock belonging to a human being, you shall lead my flock, Israel.” In the shepherd’s patient love, God saw the quality in a person which above all God could use.

David was a shepherd before becoming King of Israel. Moses was a shepherd before becoming the leader to lead his people out of slavery. It’s no wonder that Jesus saw himself in that same category. “I am the good shepherd.”

The metaphor of Jesus as the good shepherd tells us then these things about God’s love for us as revealed in Jesus.

1. First, just as a good shepherd knows each of his sheep by name — so God also knows us individually. Further, a good shepherd has intimate knowledge of each of his flock. To others the sheep may be indistinguishable. But the shepherd knows them at a glance, their characters, their idiosyncrasies. Since God knows each one of us, so we are also able to know God. And as the sheep trust the shepherd, so also, we can trust God. We know that God has only our best interests at heart. God is with us, even in the valley of the shadow of death.

2. Secondly, just as a good shepherd has infinite patience with his sheep, with their waywardness, their foolishness, so also God has infinite patience with us. No matter how often or how far we wander off, God always seeks out the lost sheep. And night — so God is always with us.

3. Thirdly, Jesus is the Good Shepherd and just as the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, so also Jesus did for us. The Good shepherd daily risks his life for the well-being of the sheep.

The shepherd was entirely responsible for the flock. If a sheep was sick, he must tend it. If a sheep strayed, he must follow it. Even when the flock was gathered for the night within the fold, the shepherd’s responsibility was not ended, and his watchfulness could not be relaxed. The fold might be a cave on the hillside. It might be an enclosure walled around with stones. On the higher slopes of the hills, it might be no more than a space enclosed by a roughly made palisade of branches and thorn bushes. Whatever it was like, the fold had one constant characteristic — it had an opening, but it had nothing to cover the opening — no door or gate. At night the shepherd lay down across the opening, and thus no sheep could get out and no foe could get in except over the shepherd’s body. That is what Jesus was thinking of when he said, “I am the door.” The body of the shepherd was literally the protecting door which kept the sheep safe.

So it is that at this advent Season we worship Jesus, the Good Shepherd. He comes in strength and courage to lead us back to God. Unceasingly, he watches over his people, and Jesus is with us the end of the world.

So this Christmas when you sing of shepherds watching over their flocks by night, and shepherds hearing the angels sing, the shepherds going to the manager to see the baby Jesus — remember the Good Shepherd is none other than Jesus himself. With the good shepherd leading us—“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life and we shall dwell in the presence of God forever.” Amen.