Sunday, December 15, 1996
JESUS: THE GOOD SHEPHERD
Luke 2:8-14; John 10:14-18

During the Advent and Christmas season, we hear a lot about shepherds. According to Luke's gospel, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the good news of his birth was given first to the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks in a field near the manger. The connection between shepherds and Jesus has a fascinating background.

Anticipating the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah spoke of the Messiah as 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, Jesus surely heard that passage from Isaiah many times. I'm sure, too, that he knew the 23rd Psalm by 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."

So it is not surprising to find Jesus using the metaphor of the shepherd to describe himself and his ministry. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus told his disciples. He described God's love with the parable of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to go after the one that is lost. In another place, he said, "I have many sheep, and some are not of this fold." After the resurrection, Jesus told Peter, "Feed my sheep."

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

The picture of Jesus as the good shepherd is one of the first images shown to children in Sunday school. In an agricultural society, the picture is vivid and clear, but not so much for us today. We do not see shepherds on hillsides taking care of their sheep. However, when Jesus used the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep, he painted a picture that was deeply woven into the thought and language of the people of his time. Again and again in the Old Testament, God is pictured as the shepherd of people, not only in the familiar 23rd Psalm but in many other places.

Listen to the 95th Psalm: "For God is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand."

The prophet Ezekiel describes the Messiah as a shepherd, and in Jeremiah, the shepherd metaphor is used again. The Old Testament is filled with the imagery of the shepherd and the sheep to describe God's relationship with Israel.

Jesus took over the picture of the shepherd and made it a description of himself and his ministry. He is the shepherd who goes out to the mountains and the hills, the valleys and

ravines, the cliffs and crags, to seek and find the sheep which are lost. He is moved with compassion for the people of his time because they are like sheep without a shepherd.

The picture reaches its most complete form in the Gospel of John, where Jesus is quoted as saying, “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.”

The metaphor of Jesus as the good shepherd passed into the language of the early church, so that later in the New Testament, church leaders are described as shepherds. In fact, the English word “pastor” is derived from the Latin word for shepherd.

Even though we don’t often see shepherds in our day, it’s still a good metaphor for the ministry of Jesus and for our ministry as a congregation and as individuals. Here’s why.

In Jesus’ day, the shepherd’s equipment was simple. He had his scrip, a bag made of animal skin in which he carried basic food — bread, dried fruit, olives, and cheese. He had his sling. In Palestine, shepherds were highly skilled in the use of the sling. They could sling a stone at a small target and not miss. David, in the Old Testament, before he became king of Israel, was a young shepherd who knew how to use the sling. In the story of David and Goliath, David wins the contest with the use of his sling.

The shepherd in Jesus’ time had no dog to send after stray sheep. He had his rod and his staff. The staff was a long stick with a crook on the end. The shepherd always 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 waist, attached to his belt. It was a stout piece of wood, perhaps three feet long, with a lump of wood the size of an orange on one end. With this, the shepherd fought to defend the flock, using it to drive off wild animals and to protect the sheep from robbers.

In Jesus’ time, shepherds were looked down upon by very religious people. Because of their work, which demanded continuous care of the sheep, they could not observe all the complicated religious rules of handwashing and ceremonial cleansing. There were times when they could not observe the stated hours of prayer or fully rest on the Sabbath.

Because of the nature of their work, the shepherds lived in wide open spaces, beneath the silent stars at night, close to the elements, in the midst of life, death, birth, and peril. Many shepherds felt a special closeness to God. The complicated ceremonies of religion may have been impossible, but the awareness of God and trust in God were never far away.

In that part of the world where Jesus lived, the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep was different from what we know today, especially in our region.

In some parts of the world, sheep are bred and raised mainly for slaughter and food. In other places, they are bred and raised primarily for their milk and wool. Where that was the primary goal, the shepherd and the sheep stayed together for as long as eight or nine years. The shepherd had a specific name for every sheep, and the sheep came to know their names.

Having that kind of close relationship, the shepherd did not drive the sheep before him; he went in front of them, and they followed him. Frequently, the shepherd had to lead his flock through narrow, dark passages that were excellent hiding places for wild animals, thieves, and robbers. At such times, the shepherd would go first to make sure it was safe for the sheep to

follow. As the 23rd Psalm describes 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 God’s people. 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 spring to drink from. When Moses came close to the lamb, 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 a quality in Moses that God could use. What a good example for one who wants to be a leader.

David was a shepherd before becoming king of Israel. Moses was a shepherd before becoming the leader who led his people out of bondage. 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 these things about God’s love and care as revealed in Jesus.

First, just as a good shepherd knows each of his sheep by name, so God also knows and loves us individually. Furthermore, a good shepherd has intimate knowledge of each of his flock. To others, the sheep might all look alike and be indistinguishable, but the shepherd knows them at a glance, their characters, their idiosyncrasies.

Since God knows each one of us, so we also can know God. And as sheep trust the shepherd, so we can trust God. We know that God has only our best interests at heart. God is with us and goes ahead of us, even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Secondly, just as a good shepherd has infinite patience with his sheep — with their waywardness, their foolishness, and their tendency to graze in the wrong pastures — so God has infinite patience with us. No matter how often or how far we wander off, God always seeks out the lost sheep. And as a shepherd stays with his flock, day and night, so God is always with us.

Third, Jesus is the good shepherd, and just as the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, so 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 tended to it. If a sheep strayed, he followed it. Even when the flock was gathered for the night within the fold, the shepherd’s responsibility did not end, and his watchfulness could not be relaxed. It’s a good metaphor for parents, as well as for leaders.

The sheepfold might be an enclosure walled 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, the fold had one constant characteristic: it had an opening but no covering. At night, the shepherd lay down across the opening and made his bed there. 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 that kept the sheep safe.

In this Advent season, when we remember the shepherds at the manger, it's helpful to recall Jesus as the good shepherd. He comes in strength, love, and courage to lead us back to God. Unceasingly, he watches over his people and is with us until the end of our lives.

So during this season, when you sing again of shepherds watching over their flocks by night, and of shepherds hearing the angels sing, and shepherds being the first to go to the manger 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 lives, and we shall dwell in the presence of God forever." Amen.