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 the birth was given first to the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks in a field near the manger. Shepherds and Jesus, the connection has a fascinating background.

Anticipating the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah spoke of the Messiah 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 head 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."

So it is not surprising to find Jesus using the metaphor of the shepherd in describing 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 99 sheep and goes 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 which 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 pictures shown to children in Sunday church school. In an agricultural society, the picture is vivid and clear, but not so much for us today. We do not see shepherds on the hillside taking care of their sheep.However, when Jesus used the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep, he used a picture which was 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 God's hand."

The prophet Ezekiel describes the Messiah as

being 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 into a description of himself and his ministry. He is 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 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 the church leaders are described as shepherds. In fact the English word, "Pastor" is nothing other than the Latin word for shepherd.

Even though shepherds are not very often seen in our day, it's still a good metaphor for the ministry of Jesus and our ministry as a congregation and as individuals. Here's why.

In Jesus' day, the shepherd's equipment was simple. He had his scrip, which was a bag made

of the skin of an animal. In it he carried his basic food--bread, dried fruit, olives, 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 the King of Israel, was a young shepherd who knew how to use the sling. In the story of David and the giant 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. 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 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 the battles to defend the flock, using it to drive off wild animals and to protect the flock against the robbers who tried to 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, shepherds were looked down on by the 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 rest completely on the Sabbath.

Because of the nature of their work, the shepherds 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 many of the 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 was never far away.

In that part of the world where Jesus lived, the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep was different from any thing that we know in today's world especially where we live.

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 for their wool. Where that is the primary goal, the shepherd and the sheep were 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 which were excellent hiding places for wild animals and for thieves and robbers. At such times the shepherd would go first to make sure that 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 peo-

ple 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 spring from which to drink. 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 the quality in a person which above all God could use.

What a good example for one who wants to be a leade

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 then tells us these things about God's love and care as revealed in Jesus.

First, in the same way as a good shepherd knows each of the 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 also we are able to know God. And as 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 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 foolishess, the tendency to graze in the wrong pastures, 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 as a shepherd stays with his flock, day and night, so God is always with us.

Third, Jesus is the good shepherd and in the same way 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-b-eing 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 did not end and his watchfulness could not be relaxed. It's a good metaphor for those of us who are parents in addition to those of us who are leaders.

The sheep fold 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, the fold had one

constant characteristic--it had an opening, but it had nothing to cover the opening. At night the shepherd lay down across the opening and made his bed there. 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.

In this Advent season when we remember the shepherds at the manger, it's especially 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 to the end of our lives.

So during this season when you sing again of

shepherds watching over the flocks by night, and of shepherds hearing the angels sing, the 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 life and we shall dwell in the presence of God forever."

Amen.