

Jesus, Our Shepherd King
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It's been a while since I've seen a sheep. And I don't know if I've ever in all my days seen an actual, real-life shepherd. When I pull in our neighborhood, **I see lots of SUVs and kids riding bikes, a creepy ice cream truck every so often,** and an Amazon truck every 30 minutes or so it seems...maybe it will be drones soon. But I have never once seen a wandering herdsman pass through with his sheep in tow.

Due to our passage today and our general lack of familiarity with shepherds, I want to start by telling you an Old Testament story that will be relevant to our passage.

You may have heard of King David, even if your biblical knowledge isn't high. He's arguably the most famous king of Israel, both for his heroism and for his failings. **But his background should ring some Christmas bells in your mind because he was born in a little town called Bethlehem.** This is noteworthy that the most famous king in Israelite history would come from Bethlehem **because it was known as the least significant little town** in a rather insignificant area. Bethlehem had a **rural, hillbilly vibe,** and it's ironic because **in 2020 that seems like the only group left that it's socially acceptable to mock or belittle.**

And if you remember the story, **when the Lord sends Samuel to Bethlehem to find Israel's next king, at first David isn't even there.** His older brothers are there, hoping to be chosen as king, but David is out in the wilderness tending the sheep. **He is at the bottom of the totem pole in his family, so his job is to be the shepherd.**

Here's where we need some help, due to the lack of sheep in our everyday lives. When I was growing up, there were these figurines church people collected called Precious Moments. **They were these cutesy little ceramic things that were designed to make elderly women say, "Awww."**



See these cute little guys? I mean, could you possibly make anything look **more docile and harmless?** Look at that shepherd, with his cute little shepherd's crook. **And those adorable little guys.**

So when I was growing up, **I think I just kind of subconsciously came to this conclusion that shepherds, and therefore David, must have been real pansies.** Like they just walk around in pristine grass and pet cuddly sheep, because there was no real work to do I guess?

The reality that anyone growing up in a pre-modern farming community would know is that shepherding is brutal work for tough men, out in the elements. Sheep, despite their intrinsic value, were

often dumb, directionless, and utterly defenseless. A shepherd's job was to keep dozens, if not hundreds of these creatures alive, in open fields or wilderness, day and night, and at times needed to get them safely from one place to another place miles away.

It's hard enough for me to corral my 4 kids through the Target parking lot. Now think about doing that with hundreds of sheep. **Think about closing your eyes at night, under the stars, knowing your job is to keep a hundred sheep from being eaten in the middle of the night.**

And the book of 1 Samuel tells us that **the threats in ancient Israel were not the coyotes or hogs we have in SC, but lions. Bears.** When Israel is facing almost certain defeat against the Philistines and their giant warrior Goliath, **David the shepherd boy has this epic moment where he offers to fight Goliath.** Here's what he says:

1 Samuel 17:33-36

And Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth." But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God."

Well okay then. **So David is basically like Liam Neeson, except with lions and bears. That's a very different mental image than those Precious Moments figurines, isn't it?**

With that context, there's a prophecy about the coming Messiah in the book of Micah. This occurs way after the reign of David, Israel's first shepherd king. **Micah is writing in the 8th century BC during the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel. This is a time where God's people are divided and scattered, much like sheep due to their own foolish decisions and the threats of outside enemies too powerful for them. And in their predicament the Spirit prompts these prophetic words:**

Micah 5:2,4-5a

"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.

And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.
And he shall be their peace.

The prophet Micah says that God's going to do it again. He is yet again going to raise up a ruler from this insignificant place called Bethlehem. **A ruler who is from of old, from ancient days. And this ruler will be a mighty shepherd, both loving and not-to-be-messed-with.** He will hold a shepherd's crook in his hand ready to keep his sheep safe, guide them away from peril, and fight off any attacker.

And when this ruler stands to shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, God's people will finally dwell securely. He will be their peace, a wise and powerful protector and guide.

This prophecy comes into play in a famous Christmas narrative from Matthew chapter 2 (Matthew 2:1-6 slide). Jesus had been born, in Bethlehem, and there was a ton of buzz in the religious and political community. Herod was king, and he didn't fancy anyone else who claimed that title.

Matthew 2:1-6

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men[a] from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose[b] and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; **(most likely meaning that the religious and political leaders in Jerusalem are greatly concerned)** and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

And, you guessed it--the scribes quote to him Micah 5. This shepherd king will be born in the same place the first shepherd king was born.

Micah 5:5-6

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

The long-awaited, foretold Shepherd King had arrived, born in a manger in Bethlehem.

But instead of shepherding sheep, Jesus would shepherd the souls of those made in his image. Instead of battling lions and bears, Jesus would crush the head of the eternal serpent. Instead of crumbling to temptation, as David did, Jesus would stand tall against it and save His people.

And of the many implications we could draw from this beautifully fulfilled prophecy, **I want to hone in on two takeaways.**

First: We are sheep who *need* a shepherd.

By the nature of how metaphors work, if Jesus came to be our shepherd, **that only leaves one role for us to play.** It's not an entirely unflattering role. **Sheep were cherished and vital animals, beloved by their shepherds.** But the less-desirable implications also apply.

We, like sheep, can be spiritually dumb. We put ourselves in harm's way. **We make foolish, awful decisions out of our sheep brains (or what Scripture calls our flesh).** We often trade the thing we want most, our spiritual good, for the lesser thing we want now--no matter how much it hurts ourselves or others.

We are often directionless. I don't know about you guys, but I struggle to lead myself. **Sometimes I actually know the right way to go, and I still struggle to will myself in that direction.** I get distracted by shiny things and creature comforts.

And we, like sheep, are often defenseless about one thing or another. It's likely different things for a group of us this large. **You might look at the addictions or hang-ups of someone else and think, "Man, they are just helpless against that it seems," but you have your own areas of shocking vulnerability.** We all do.

Our “sheepness” often gets exposed in particular ways through the holiday season. **Some of us are caught up in the lie that that next purchase is finally gonna be the one to put right what’s lacking in your soul.** You wouldn’t say it out loud, but in your soul, you believe that thing you long for is gonna do more for your happiness than it possibly can. **We do this, over and over, because we are sheep.** Those things will fade just like all the rest of them have.

Some of you are unable to sit still. You tell yourself it’s just that you are so busy, but the reality is that **being still makes you wildly uncomfortable because it brings up things you’d much rather not face.** It turns out that all the activities that come with Christmas become wonderful coping mechanisms that allow you to never be still before God, and you don’t feel guilty about it because they all “need” to get done. **This happens because you are a sheep.**

Others of you, even with all the resources given to you in Christ, **just can’t manage to get along with those closest to you.** So this season brings new layers of conflict and friction, and instead of seeking to reconcile and be at peace with others as much as it depends on you, you tend to just grin and bear it, to roll your eyes and move on. **I hate to tell you this, but that’s because you are a sheep.**

Some of us are decimated by self-image issues. You are constantly in your own head worrying about how others perceive you...**you have a permanent barometer of how you feel about your body that never turns off.** This season, which tends to be full of holiday food and treats becomes a big trigger for you, and it will be hard for your focus to turn to adore Jesus because it’s already so hopelessly bent back on you. **This happens, about looks or other areas of insecurity, because you and I are sheep.**

We are sheep, who need a shepherd. Voices in our culture will offer solutions to all of those problems, tell you the self-sufficiency gospel of America. **That you already have what it takes, that you can fix this if you just put your mind to it and never give up.**

Those voices...are liars. They haven’t worked, for anyone! Look around you. Scripture is more humbling because it says “*No, you actually don’t have what it takes, because you are a sheep.*” **But it’s also far more hopeful because it doesn’t stop there.** It also tells us that...

Second: We are sheep who *have* a shepherd.

We are weak, needy, with problems we can’t solve ourselves. We are defenseless--all in our own unique ways. A sheep on its own is eventually going to hurt itself or get eaten--those are the two options. **But we are not left on our own, because we have a Shepherd who came after us.** To gather His sheep to Himself, guide them, and protect them from the spiritual harm they are so defenseless against.

In 1 Peter 5, Peter draws a connection to all of this that I think is so cool. He talks about pastors being shepherds under Jesus who is the chief Shepherd, and then he says this in verse 8:

1 Peter 5:8

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

When I read this, my mind goes back to what David said in 1 Samuel about his time as a shepherd. He said if one of his sheep got taken by a lion, he, quote “*went after him and struck him and delivered him out of his mouth.*” So Paul says: **you are the sheep, Satan is the lion, and Jesus is the Chief Shepherd who came to Liam Neeson the lion and save us.**

The worldview of Scripture is **one where real forces of spiritual evil are seeking to devour us, and this devouring can come through a variety of means**--often from where you don't expect it. The devouring forces I see at work here often come through **addiction** or **bitterness** or **pornography** or **secularism** or **materialism**, but there is no limit to their creativity in your life. **They can also come through holiday purchases, or busyness, or even a plate of Christmas desserts.**

And please...hear this: **If you think you can protect yourself against these devouring forces, you are the greatest of fools.** You have not a prayer against the teeth they will sink into you without you even seeing them. **Because you are a sheep who doesn't see a whole world of threats lined up against you.**

But a well-trained shepherd with the right weapon can solve every problem you have. He can kill the lion. And the baby screaming into the night in Bethlehem came to be just that kind of shepherd for us.

This Shepherd is a capable protector, a fierce defender. He senses threats coming your way that you are blissfully blind to. **He sees all around you when all you see is in front of your face.** He knows when we become a threat to our own selves. **And these original hearers would have understood something we don't: there were times when a sheep probably thought the shepherd was trying to kill them.** Because all they felt was his crook around their neck yanking them away. **When in reality, he was keeping them alive.**

Jesus is our Good Shepherd, who laid down His very life for His sheep. That's how we know the extent to which He loves us, that we can trust Him no matter what we are able to see.

What this presents us with is a reminder. This season is always crazy busy and rushed. There are gifts to buy, lights to put up, Christmas treats to bake, classic Christmas movies to watch. **And all too often I blink and it's January 1st,** and I sense that there was spiritual richness I lost out on due to the chaos.

What this advent season ultimately tells us is that we needed to be saved. To be rescued. From spiritual evil hellbent on devouring us. From our own abhorrent folly. From the well-deserved wrath of God from our sin. **Because we are sheep, and we are utterly hopeless unless someone does for us what we can't do for ourselves.**

And God, He sent us the Shepherd that we desperately need but don't deserve. The Son of God, the second person of the eternal Godhead, incarnated into human flesh. **He was a beating heart the size of a pea.** He was encircled in expectant and protective fluid for months, while tendons and bones were mysteriously formed. **His terrified and obedient mother was whisked away from her home in late pregnancy, only to come to a full inn,** with no one having the decency to offer their room to a woman bursting with labor. **Our shepherd was therefore born *with* the sheep, in the stable--a fitting metaphor for what He came to do.**

So if you are a Christian, I'd draw your attention to the many ways that you needed saving. Who would you be without the saving work of grace in your life? How has this Shepherd-King rescued you, guarded, and strengthened the areas where you are defenseless against sin? **What vapid foolishness would your life be defined by if it were not for a Shepherd-King who put his crook around your neck?** What lion's mouth has He snatched you out of, and how would you be devoured had He not done so?

In the midst of everything else this season brings, take some time to bask in the answers to those questions. To thank Him, to adore Him, to marvel at Him, to gaze at the miracle where all of this started.

And if you are not a Christian, I simply lay all of this before you. It may be that the Good Shepherd is pursuing you even now, at this very moment, in this chaotic year. **You do have to accept that you are a sheep, much in need of rescue.**

But what you get in return is the Shepherd you've always needed. He is good. He was foretold through the mouths of prophets He created, born in a Bethlehem manger, and He comes to you even now, through the internet of all things. **What lengths must He go through to get your attention, to bring you into His flock?**

Don't let another Christmas go by without trusting Him.

Pray.