

The Nativity

The Shepherds: Gathered and Carried

Fairview Missionary Church | Angola, IN

Scripture: Assorted

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You know, one of the pictures that we are given in Scripture of God to help us understand who He is and who we are better is the picture of a shepherd with His sheep. And of course, in this picture, God is the Shepherd and we are the sheep. And I know I've told you before, but I grew up as a city boy. So this picture analogy didn't really help me because I didn't know a lot about shepherds and about sheep until I read about them. And I learned that shepherds were known for being strong.

They were known for being fit and courageous. Yet they had to have a soft side to them. They had to be loving and tender. They often were minimalistic as they would travel just in the open country with what they could carry on their backs. They had to have a strong stomach in order to deal with the smell and the issues that sheep would have. They had to be okay with being alone. And yet, at the same time, be protective and trustworthy and attentive. Their lives were defined by being sacrificial and enduring.

Their number one job, their number one responsibility was to provide for and to protect the sheep at all costs. And sheep aren't the easiest thing to take care of. As you study sheep, you find that they feel safer in groups. They're naturally followers, not leaders. That's why they herd together. Many scientists and shepherds believe that sheep can recognize faces of humans.

They thrive on routine, on having a schedule, and they are capable of a wide range of emotions, meaning they know what it is to have fear and sadness and happiness. And one of the last things you need to know about sheep is they have poor depth perception. They can't see far away. Aren't you feeling good about yourself that we're the sheep in the analogy, right? This is what we are. This defines us and who we are.

But I find it beautiful that through this picture, that we are the sheep, that we understand that God doesn't love us because of what I can give back to Him. Because a sheep can give nothing back to the shepherd. But God loves us simply because He chooses to love me. God doesn't just seek out the beautiful, obedient sheep. He also seeks out those that wander, the questioners, the messy ones, and even the loud ones.

And if we're honest with ourselves, most of us have been the loud sheep at times. We've had difficulties. We've had struggles. Maybe we've even wandered. And it's possible, probably probable, that we have caused a little chaos in our lives as well. And yet, here is what we will learn today. God doesn't love us despite our wandering. He loves us through our wandering. He is with us the entire time. He doesn't wait for us to find our way back before he starts looking.

He doesn't require us to clean up our act before He will carry us home. Today, I want to take some time to look and see what the Scripture says about our beautiful shepherd, Jesus, that you and I would be reminded that the reason Jesus came into this world was to seek and to save the lost. And when he does that, as the Good Shepherd coming to collect his sheep, he doesn't come yelling from a distance, scolding us.

Instead, Scripture says that He lifts us up and places us on His shoulders in order to carry us close to His heart. I've always loved the fact that God chose shepherds to hear and share the good news that the Savior had been

born. And so today, as we learn about shepherd and sheep, may we be reminded that Jesus is our good shepherd. We're going to begin in Luke chapter 15 with a parable that many of you have probably heard before.

Luke chapter 15 verses 4 through 7, the parable of the shepherd and the hundred sheep. But before we read that, let me pray. Heavenly Father, we come before You. We are grateful that You are our great shepherd, that You love us even when we wander. You love us when we cause problems. You love us even when we make life difficult. You don't stand at a distance yelling at us, scolding us. Instead, you long to carry us on your shoulders.

And so we thank you for your grace and your mercy and your forgiveness. Thank you that there's not a single person here that can stand on their own merit before you. And thank you that we don't have to clean up our act before you come looking for us. Continue to speak to our hearts. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. In Luke chapter 15, Jesus is going to share a parable, and he is initially sharing it with the Jewish people, which will make it a little more impactful, as I'll talk about in a moment. But let's look at this parable.

Jesus says, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the 99 in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?" And then when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and he says, "Rejoice with me. I have found my lost sheep." And here's the conclusion.

I tell you that in the same way, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent. When we look at God as our shepherd, we see that our God is a God who seeks. He is a God who searches for us, who comes looking for us. From a business perspective, if we have any business people in here, if you only lost one sheep out of 100, you probably would take that.

You're doing pretty good. For those of you that love math, that's just a 1% loss, right? Not bad for a business and in the business world. But you and I can be glad that God doesn't see us as a business venture. God doesn't see us as a business venture. He loves us. God doesn't care about the math. He cares about the one. That one lost sheep is not expendable because it has a name. It has a story. It has a place in the flock.

And if you notice in the story, the shepherd doesn't just go out and take a quick look around. The scripture tells us that he goes until he finds it. Not until he gets tired, not until it's convenient, not until he's just done his due diligence. He goes until he finds it. And it is important for us to remember that that is God's heart towards us. He will seek us out until He finds us. He doesn't give up. He doesn't quit. And the amazing truth of the matter is that Jesus knows you.

You're not just a face in the crowd. You are not just a number. God knows your name and He knows your story. Scripture even says that He knows us more than we know ourselves. And so He knows where we wander when we're hurt or scared. He knows where to find us because He knows us. If you're here today, maybe you're watching online, maybe even just listening on the radio, and you hear this and you feel lost, I need you to know that Jesus is looking for you.

Maybe you find yourself in a position right now, a place where you have made some choices that have caused you to wander into territory that you never thought you'd explore. You would openly and honestly say, "Pastor, today, I know that I have said things. I know that I have done things that I never thought I would say or do." It's possible, pastor, that I'm just too far gone. You don't know the mistakes that I have made. Maybe you believe that you have wandered too far and that God has given up the search for you.

May I remind you that that is not how the shepherd works? Our good shepherd's love doesn't have a geographical limit or an expiration date. If you are here today and you have been found, you know the great love that God has for us. And so I ask you the question, how are you doing in your circles of finding the One? We all have people around us, friends, family, co-workers, neighbors.

And so I ask you the question, just as I ask myself the question, who is your one? We have all been called to shepherd and to love those around us following in the footsteps of our great shepherd. Who is the one in your

life that has wandered off? I know it would be easy for you to say, "Pastor, you don't understand my one. They've made their choice. They're the worst sheep you could ever imagine." Right? They've made so many mistakes. I've tried to talk to them about the love of Jesus, and they just don't want it. Can I just ask you?

What if instead of waiting for them to wander into the field, you went after them? You went after your one, not with judgment, not with a sales pitch, but with genuine love and presence. Maybe you spent time with your one just a couple weeks ago over Thanksgiving. Maybe you're going to be spending time with them over Christmas. And I can honestly tell you, sometimes the one that is the most difficult is your family member. Can I get an amen, please? Yeah. It's hard. We all have family members that we have tried to love.

We have poured into them. And at some point, I understand it's easy just to say, "Pastor, I have to give up. I just can't do it anymore." But I'm here to remind you that God doesn't give up on us. We shouldn't give up on those that we love. It's important to know that God doesn't just seek us as the good shepherd, but He's also a shepherd who lifts us up. There's this beautiful picture that we have in Scripture of what God does as our shepherd.

Following the example of shepherds in Isaiah chapter 40:11, Isaiah tells us that he tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms, and he carries them close to his heart. He gently leads those who have young. Let me explain to you what this looks like, this picture. When a shepherd finds a wandering sheep, unlike other cattle or animals where you might drag them to get them where you want, or you stand behind them and prod them with a stick to get them going in the correct direction, this is not what a shepherd does with his sheep.

Instead, the shepherd will pick up the sheep and carry it over his shoulders, known as the shepherd's carry. And this was done for various reasons. When the body of the sheep is resting across the shepherd's neck, the sheep could feel the shepherd's heartbeat. The sheep could feel the shepherd breathing and hear it. And he could sense every movement of the shepherd. You see, when the shepherd carries his sheep this way, it wasn't a form of punishment because the sheep had wandered off.

Instead, it was an effort of protection and love. This is how the shepherd would remind the sheep that he is there to protect it and to care for it and to love it. You know, there are seasons in our life that we find we can't walk on our own. We need somebody to lift us up. We need somebody to carry us. And it could be for a myriad of reasons. Maybe you're here today and you have a grief that is so heavy that it has knocked the wind out of your sails.

You say, "I can't walk, pastor." Maybe you're here today and you have such a spirit and a burden of depression that it makes every step feel impossible. You're not sure how you're going to take the next step. The fact that you're even here today or watching online or listening on the radio is a step that you thought you would never be able to take. Maybe it's a crisis of faith that has left you unable to move forward because you have a question that doesn't have an answer. Your question is, why would God allow fill-in-the-blank?

When you find yourself in a season that you can't walk, be reminded that God doesn't stand at a distance shouting encouragements or even mocking you or making fun of you. Instead, we should envision God as our good shepherd who wants to lift us up and carry us. Sometimes this is hard for us. Why is it in our culture that we resist being carried? We resist being carried. We want to be independent.

We want to be self-reliant because we see needing help as a failure or a weakness. But what if it was actually the opposite? What if recognizing the need to be carried was actually a sign of wisdom and not weakness? You see, when God carries us, it's not a begrudging rescue. It's not something he feels like he has to do. Instead, it's a way that he shows his affectionate care. Jesus isn't carrying you, counting the minutes until he can put you down because the burden is too great for him.

Instead, when Jesus is carrying you, He is holding you close because that is where you belong. He wants you over His shoulders caring so you can feel the heartbeat. You can hear His breath. It is where you belong. And so maybe, again, you are in that season right now where you feel like you can't walk on your own. Maybe you wish

you had more faith. Maybe you wish you had more strength or more spiritual stamina. Can I just encourage you? Let Jesus lift you up.

Let Him hold you close to His heart. And don't see it as a spiritual failure. Instead, see it as a moment of spiritual intimacy. Maybe you do come today and you say, "Pastor, I'm in a good spot right now. I'm in a good place right now. I'm healthy. Finances are good. Relationships are good. I feel good. Everything is great. My question to you is, how can you help carry others in their moment of need? Maybe it's as easy as providing for somebody's practical needs, especially during this season. You guys are such a generous church.

I love the ways that you provide for other people through the shoeboxes and through Angel Tree and through the food and the ministry that you bring in, the helping ministry, all of the ways that you give to others. That's one way that you can help carry somebody else. Maybe it's emotionally bearing the weight of someone's pain or fear. Maybe you don't have the words to say, but you know somebody is going through a tough stretch. And so you say, I don't have answers to your questions, but I can at least sit with you. Maybe it's answering the phone call that comes in the middle of the night because they just need somebody to talk to.

Maybe it's interceding for someone who can't find the right words to pray. And so somebody comes to you and says, "I just need you to pray for me." And your response can be, "I don't really know how to pray for you, but I will just lift you up to my great shepherd." And so you offer the prayer for somebody else who needs it and is going through a difficult time. Not only do we serve a shepherd who seeks and a shepherd who lifts us up, but we also serve a shepherd who unites. John chapter 10 verses 14 through 16, Jesus says this, "I am the good shepherd.

I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep." Jesus says, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, for they too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." When Jesus spoke these words, you have to remember that He was speaking to an audience of Jewish individuals who saw themselves as God's chosen people.

Their story was recorded in the Old Testament, and they were certainly God's chosen people coming through the line of Abraham. And God said, "I am going to bless the world through you." But then Jesus says to them, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen." Now, we read that 2,000 years later, and we may recognize what it means, or we may not. But when the Jewish audience heard that, I can just imagine all of their jaws dropping to the ground, saying, "Wait a second. Who are these other people, these other sheep that Jesus was referring to?

Do you know who he was referring to?" You and me. That's right. The Gentiles, or those that are not of Jewish descent. I guess if you are of Jewish descent, then no, you're already in. But the Gentiles, we are the other sheep that he is going to invite into the sheep pen. And these people were different. The Gentile people were different. They didn't have the history of the Jews. They didn't have the traditions or the culture. And yet, Jesus says to them, "I am going to bring them into this flock." And in the first century, when the Jews heard this, this idea that the Gentiles could be included in God's family without first being converted to Judaism, was revolutionary.

Jesus was seemingly changing all the rules. There was only going to be one flock in one shepherd. God's family was going to include all personality types, all backgrounds, and all cultures, meaning that the flock of Christ was meant to be diverse. And sometimes, for those of us that have been around for a while, diversity is messy, isn't it? Diversity is messy. It's difficult.

So our human tendency, even believers, is to join flocks that look just like you, people that you are comfortable with, but God is calling us to be different. Our unity as the flock of Christ should not be found in our similarities. Our unity should be found in that we have the same shepherd, Jesus. And we're not great at this. The church doesn't have a history of being great at this.

Instead, the church has a history of creating different pens for different groups of believers, often separated by race, by class, whether it's a social class or financial differences. We separate churches based on education and politics and worship style and a hundred other factors. And so we have turned preferences into convictions and convictions into barriers, which is why if you've been at this church for a while, you know that one of my main messages is unity over preference.

We are going to have unity over preference. Jesus said, "These other sheep will hear my voice." This means they're not going to hear a pastor's voice. They're not going to hear my preference or my tradition or my worship style. Instead, the sheep will hear the voice of God. And this should truly be freeing to us. We don't have to convince everyone to be just like us to join the flock. Isn't that great? We all can be different. That's what God has called us to.

Our job is simply to help people hear the voice of the shepherd. And so I ask the question, "How are we doing with the diversity in the flock of Jesus?" I know it's difficult. I know that you and I naturally gravitate towards people who look like us, who think like us, who vote like us, and worship like us. But who are the other sheep in your circles, the people who maybe don't fit your mold, and you can invite them into the flock? Because every single one of us, if we were in the right setting, might be the outside sheep.

And wouldn't you want somebody to invite you into the fold? What would it look like for our church to pursue that type of unity that Jesus envisioned that we all would be part of one family? Friends, Christmas is the story of a shepherd who became a sheep to seek us, to lift us, and to unite us close to his heart. Life doesn't always look like that peaceful nativity scene. And it can be frustrating. I get it. Sometimes it can be loud, sometimes it can be messy.

But here is the miracle of the story. The shepherd's return quiets the chaos. Jesus' return quiets the chaos. Jesus finds us in our wandering and He lifts us up in our weakness. He welcomes us in our differences and He promises to hold us close to His heart. If you're here today and you've never experienced that kind of love before, if you've just been watching from a distance but never allowed yourself to be gathered into the flock, today could be the day.

For the shepherd to pick you up, all he asks is that you would acknowledge you need to be picked up. That you would acknowledge before him, I know I've made mistakes. There's not a single person in here that is a perfect sheep without blemish. All of us are dirty. All of us are messy. All of us have wandered off. And so you admit that to a shepherd that loves you and cares for you, and you say, "I need your help." Scripture says that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart, God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. He will pick you up.

He will bring you into His family. Be reminded that the Shepherd is looking for you. He knows your name. You're not just a number. He knows where you have wandered, and He is ready to lift you up and carry you home. As always, the altar is open. If you want to come and pray, you can come and pray during the closing song. If you don't want anybody to bother you, come to the altars. If you want prayer, we'll have people on both sides that would love to pray with you. But if you just want privacy, you can come to your business with God here. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for today.

We thank you that you are our good shepherd. Thank you that we are all in the same boat. We can't earn your merit. We can't earn your favor. You simply have loved us by your grace and by your mercy, and so we're grateful for your forgiveness. Thank you for being our good shepherd and holding us close. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.