

The Irony of Christmas

Matthew 2:13-18

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Sometimes in life, we discover things that are pretty ironic. Some common examples are rain on your wedding, a free ride when you've already paid, or the good advice that you just didn't take. Wouldn't you think? It figures.

Ok, admittedly those may not be the best examples of irony...but they are the lyrics of a famous song called "Irony". Nonetheless, irony is when something happens that is the opposite of what you would expect to happen. The unexpected juxtaposition captures your attention and sometimes is used for humorous effect.

There are a couple of different examples of this kind of irony in the Christmas story and the life of Jesus. It is ironic that Jesus was worshiped by shepherds when He would be the perfect shepherd. But those shepherds didn't know that at the time. Similarly, Jesus, the greatest king that ever was and ever will be was in humble circumstances and came to be a servant of his people, while Herod lived in opulence and served his own ends instead. I think there's value in examining the irony of the Christmas story, because it helps to remind us of why Christmas is such a big deal, and how Jesus changes everything.

Shepherds

We talked a little last week about the role of the shepherds in the Christmas story. They were out in the fields watching their sheep at night when the angel of the Lord showed up. For most of us, the job of a shepherd is foreign. We live in an area where lots of people raise livestock, so we may have a little better understanding than most, but most of us still have little experience with sheep. It was a well-understood profession in ancient Israel, but since it is foreign to us today, we probably need to learn a little bit about raising sheep looked like in the ancient world.

Shepherds had the sole responsibility for their flocks. They would move the flock to greener pastures as needed to ensure they had what they needed to eat. A shepherd needed to be mindful of where the good grazing grounds were as well as where the appropriate places were for them to get water for their sheep. They would move the flock together to ensure they were all taken care of.

But making sure the sheep were fed and watered was not their only responsibility. Sheep were a tasty snack for many predators, and they were easy prey as they don't have much in the way of defense. So a shepherd needed to be alert to any potential predators and protect his sheep from them.

David talked about how he had fought off lions and bears as a shepherd. David (and other shepherds) didn't have shotguns with which to repel these beasts. David had a

sling and stones, his bare hands, and maybe a knife or spear of some sort. These shepherds were gentle toward their sheep but were ruthless toward predators.

Shepherds were also tasked with protecting sheep from themselves. Sheep are notoriously dumb animals. They wander off, get themselves stuck, and walk directly into danger, blissfully unaware of the fact that they are doing so. It's kind of like having a toddler. They're cute and cuddly, but you know that if you take your eye off them for a few minutes, disaster might be right around the corner. I suspect that sheep were somewhat similar in that if it was quiet for too long, you began to worry about what they might have gotten themselves into.

The shepherds in Bethlehem were out watching their flocks of sheep at night. The sheep had settled in for the night, so they were not nearly as concerned about them getting into trouble, but night was the time when predators were most likely to attack. So the shepherds had to stay vigilant, looking for any signs of predators before they arrived so they could stop them before they reached the flock.

I see great irony in the fact that the shepherds were the first to welcome the Messiah because Jesus would later describe himself as the Good Shepherd. These shepherds, who were dutiful in their care for sheep and (if they were in charge of caring for lambs being raised for Passover, as many suspect they were) may have been seen as the top shepherds in the region, were coming face to face with the ultimate shepherd, but didn't even know it!

Knowing what we do about the job of being a shepherd, what made Jesus a Good Shepherd? We see several facets to this in scripture. In John 10, Jesus uses the analogy of a shepherd to describe his role.

First, He is the gate to the sheep pen. John 10:6-10 says this,

⁶ Those who heard Jesus use this illustration didn't understand what he meant, ⁷ so he explained it to them: "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. ¹⁰ The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. (John 10:6-10, NLT)

Followers of Jesus are His sheep, and Jesus says He protects His sheep from those who would seek to harm them. He will fight off the wolves and thieves and robbers. Conversely, those who trust Jesus and listen to His voice will not only be saved but will also find a rich and satisfying life. Jesus contrasts himself with the other forces at work in our world who do not care for us at all. They simply want to use us for their own purposes. Jesus, however, loves those who belong to Him and desires to give us the best life we can have.

Second, Jesus will lay down His life for the sheep. John 10:11-13 says,

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep.

¹² A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don’t belong to him and he isn’t their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because he’s working only for the money and doesn’t really care about the sheep. (John 10:11-13, NLT)

Jesus contrasts a person who cares for the sheep with someone who is only doing a job. A person who is only concerned with getting paid doesn’t care about what happens to the flock. He’s more concerned with saving himself. If trying to protect the sheep would cost him too much, he will simply run away.

Jesus, however, does the opposite. It’s difficult for us to remember sometimes that the baby in the manger would grow to be the man who would sacrifice Himself for mankind. He would lay down His life in order to save ours. Even the best shepherds would be unwilling to make such a sacrifice, but Jesus did.

Third, His sheep know His voice. John 10:14-16 says,

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, ¹⁵ just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep.

¹⁶ I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd. (John 10:14-16, NLT)

One fascinating thing about keeping sheep is that they eventually learn the voice of their master. Others can attempt to call the sheep, but they won’t listen to them. They only respond to the voice of their master. Why? Because they have come to trust their master. They know He will protect them and lead them to where they need to go. So, when the shepherd tells the sheep to come or go, they follow because they trust Him.

Jesus says that in the same way, His sheep know His voice and follow Him. Sometimes people imagine that Christians follow God’s commands out of fear, believing that if we don’t do things the right way, then He’ll smite us and we’ll be doomed. But Jesus reminds us that His sheep follow Him not out of fear but out of trust. The more we follow the Lord’s leading the more we discover He loves us, cares for us, and desires to protect us and lead us to the things we need in life (even when we don’t realize we need them). Jesus has been consistent in His love and care for us, so we can follow Him with confidence.

Finally, He seeks the lost. In Luke, Jesus tells another story about sheep to illustrate the kind of shepherd He is.

⁴ “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do?

Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. ⁶ When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ In the

same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away! (Luke 15:4-7, NLT)

Jesus says that He cares about every one of His sheep. When one wanders off, He doesn't just turn His back on them. He doesn't say they're getting what they deserve. He doesn't beat them. Instead, He seeks them out. He works to restore them and bring them back to the fold.

Jesus coming to earth is the perfect picture of this. As human beings, we have made quite a mess of things. We have consistently chosen to rebel against God, we have become mired in sin and have left ourselves with no recourse. If I were God, I would be tempted to wash my hands of humanity and simply abandon us to live in the mess we've made for ourselves. But that's not what God did. Instead, Jesus came into the world as a human being so that He could save us. He came to seek and save the lost, rather than just abandoning us. He did so, even though it would cost Him dearly.

As we look in the manger, we should see the Good Shepherd seeking His lost sheep. As you look at your own life you may feel as though you've made such a mess of things that God can never love you again. You may feel like He will surely turn His back on you. That's simply not true. Jesus shows us that God cares for every one of us, and will do whatever it takes to restore us. Run to His voice, rather than trying to run from it.

Kings

Shepherds are not the only ironic contrast we see in the Christmas story though. The other contrast is in the kings in the Christmas story. Of course, Jesus is the King of Kings, the greatest King who will ever live, but we also see the other King, somewhat ironically known as Herod the Great.

Herod the Great was in a unique situation. While he was technically the king of the region, he was still subject to Roman rule. The Romans had allowed him to continue to rule over the area, provided that he didn't cause trouble for Rome. The Romans were smart enough to understand that a local ruler was more likely to be able to keep the people in line. So, Herod maintained the title of King, but he was still a subject of Rome.

He was known as Herod the Great because he did a number of great things. He undertook the expansion of the temple in Jerusalem, making it into a magnificent structure. The expansion took nearly 60 years to complete, and was a source of great pride and gratitude for the people of Israel. Herod also built the harbor in the city of Caesarea, which was a modern marvel, because it utilized the latest advances in hydraulic cement. He also built many fortresses around the region. Admittedly, though these were impressive structures, they were mostly self-serving. He built them as a refuge for himself and his family in the event of an insurrection.

These building projects were among the reasons he was given the title Herod the Great. But his motivation wasn't primarily about the good of his subjects. Instead, it was about

amassing more power and influence so he could maintain his power and enrich himself further.

This is clearly illustrated in the Christmas story. When the Magi (or wise men...another ironic name, given who they were visiting) came to Herod to ask about the king of the Jews, Herod saw it as a threat. When he saw that rulers from distant lands were coming to worship a baby they called “the King of the Jews” (which could rightly be considered Herod’s title), he knew he needed to eliminate the threat. So, he feigned a desire to worship alongside these men, asking them to come back and report where they found this king so he could go and pay his respects too, but secretly he was plotting murder.

When he discovered the wise men had left town without giving him the location of this newborn king, he began to worry, thinking there was a conspiracy at hand. So he decided to take drastic measures, ordering all the male children 2 years old and younger in Bethlehem to be slaughtered. That doesn’t sound very “great” to me. It certainly shows that this ruler did not care for his subjects as much as he claimed. He only cared about what his subjects could get him.

Contrast that with Jesus, the greatest King of all time, who was born in humble circumstances. He had no fortresses in which to retreat. He didn’t even have a bed. He was the One who deserved all the worship in the world but chose to become a human being instead. He chose to allow himself to become subject to the weaknesses and limitations of humanity. He got sick, He got tired, He experienced pain. Why would a King do this if He didn’t have to? The only answer is love.

Jesus loves you and me so much that He stepped out of heaven to come to earth. He was willing to take on the penalty of our sin so that He might spare us from having to bear it. How different from what we see of Herod “the great”!

It’s ironic that Herod is called “the great” king in this story when Jesus was so much greater. But it’s a reminder of how the Christmas story shows us God’s love for us. It shows us how He cares for us, and not merely what He can get from us. We can give nothing to God, yet He gives us everything. That is the irony of Christmas.

Conclusion

My hope is that looking at Christmas through the lens of the ironic juxtaposition of some of the characters in the Christmas story gives you a little different perspective on it. As we conclude today, I want to draw some lessons from what we’ve seen.

First, you matter to God. If there’s something that is evident in every part of the Christmas story, it is that God cares about His people so much that He sent Jesus to die in our place. Jesus described Himself as the Good Shepherd who cares for His sheep and lays His life down for them. He said He cared for each individual sheep so much that He would pursue them to rescue them!

This is something most of us need to hear. There are times when all of us feel like we don't matter. Maybe it's because we've messed up and feel like we're no longer worthy of love. Or maybe we feel overlooked, like no one cares. Or maybe you're just exhausted and feel like no one cares about how all you're doing affects you—they just want you to keep doing what you're doing. In the moments when you're tempted to believe you don't matter, remember the birth of the Good Shepherd. He cares about you. He not only cares about the world, He cares about YOU!

Second, Jesus' example should teach us humility. Jesus was the greatest King to have ever lived. And yet, while He would have been perfectly justified in simply abandoning His flawed creation to wallow in the mess they'd made for themselves, He didn't. He chose to lower Himself so that He could raise us up. Jesus put aside His comfort; He was willing to endure great hardship because He knew it would be good for those He loved—namely us!

This attitude should permeate our lives as well. We should follow Jesus' example of love and humility as we interact with the world around us. We should be willing to put aside our comfort, our preferences, and our desires to care for and benefit the people around us. If there was ever anyone who would have been justified in looking out only for His own interests, it would have been Jesus. But He didn't. And neither should we. Christmas gives us a great example to follow in the way we relate with the world at large.

Finally, Jesus is worthy of our trust. This is something we know intuitively, but we experience a disconnect in terms of practice. We understand intellectually that God can be trusted, that He knows better than we do, and that His way is best...but there's always this thing in the back of our minds that causes us to want to go our own way, to trust our own judgment more than His instructions, and to doubt His goodness.

Jesus has demonstrated His faithfulness over and over again, so we can trust Him as sheep trust their shepherd. I've never been a shepherd, but I do think about my dog in this vein. She knows I care for her and want what's best for her. When I call, she comes, even when she knows I want to cut her hair or trim her nails. She doesn't like it, but she trusts me. She might try to fight me on it, but ultimately submits to me because she knows I want what's best for her.

God has never given us a reason to doubt Him. Jesus has given us ample reason to trust Him! The Christmas celebration should remind us of the irony of the Good Shepherd being visited by shepherds near Jerusalem and the Great King lying in a manger, while Herod the "Great" was killing his subjects. Jesus is worthy of our trust. He's proved it over and over again. So this Christmas, work at trusting Him enough to follow in every area of your life.

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