

Shepherd's Candle
God uses everyone, even Shepherds
Pastor Ryan
Midweek Advent Service 3

Tonight we light the third candle on our Advent Wreath. Let me give you a brief review of the Advent wreath and what its candles symbolize. The first Week of Advent's candle was the prophet's candle, which symbolizes all the prophets of the Bible foretelling the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. The second week's candle was the Bethlehem candle, which symbolizes the humble birth of God's Son. And tonight's candle is the Shepherd candle which symbolizes how God uses people from all walks of life to spread the good news of His Son. I want to imagine the social ladder of the land of Israel, at the top of it would be the chief priest, then the priests, then the Levites, then the teachers of the Law, and on and on until you find yourself at the bottom rung of the social ladder, that is where you would find the occupation of shepherding. They are all the way down at the bottom. Even though shepherds are low in social status, God used them as one of His most important images of how He relates to us.

God chooses to use the image of Shepherd's to describe the vastness of His love for us. It is a personal love, the shepherd leads the sheep with the sound of His voice. In Judea and other eastern countries, where flocks and herds constituted the riches, and the feeding of them the chief employment of the principal inhabitants, practices prevailed very different from what we have been accustomed to see. Instead of a keeper following the sheep, and employing dogs on all occasions to drive them (for the use of dogs in Judea was to defend the flocks from the wild beasts of the forest and the field, and to give notice of their approach), the shepherd himself walked before the sheep, whether he led them to pasture, water, or the fold. The shepherd's going before the sheep and leading them to pure waters and verdant pastures, is a very striking and beautiful representation of God's preventing grace and continual help.

Being a shepherd in biblical times, was not an esteemed occupation. You slept in the fields with your flock; you were constantly surrounded by animals and had very few opportunities to bathe. If you were a shepherd, you could not go straight from the field to the temple you had to first be ritually cleansed because your occupation forced you to become 'unclean'.

God chose this lowly profession to explain how He lovingly relates to us as His flock. ***I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son.***¹⁰ ***"Hear the word of the LORD, O nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands: 'He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.'***¹¹ ***For the LORD will ransom Jacob and redeem them.***

God is the one who leads us throughout our lives, up the hillsides, and even down into the valleys. His presence and His faithfulness comforts us even when we walk into the deepest valleys of our lives. Then in verse 10, Listen up everyone, Hear the word of the LORD, all the nations of the world; proclaim it all

over the world from coast to coast may the Lord's word ring out. The One who scattered Israel, the One who let become an exiled nation, the One who let them fall in the hands of their enemies. This is the same Almighty LORD who will gather them and who will watch over his flock like a shepherd. For the LORD will ransom his people and redeem them from their slavery. When God rescues His people from their sin, "*They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more.*" Another image one of fragrant beautiful flowers growing securely in the garden, their faith in Jesus gives them confident hope in even the most crushing hours.

Our Lord Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd. John 10

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

In far off Syria some shepherds still maintain the old practice of calling their sheep by name. An American, doubting that each sheep would respond to its name when called by the shepherd, insisted the shepherd demonstrate.

"I wish you would call just one or two," he said.

The shepherd called, "Carl."

The sheep stopped eating and looked up.

"Come here," commanded the shepherd.

The sheep came and looked up into the shepherd's face.

He called another and another, and there they all stood looking up into the shepherd's face.

"How can you tell them apart?" asked the American.

"Oh, there are no two alike. See, that sheep's toes are in a little; this one is squint-eyed; and that one has a black mark on its nose." In fact, every one of those sheep had its own marking.

I suppose that is the way the Lord distinguishes His sheep. There is a man that is covetous; he wants to grasp the whole world. He needs a shepherd to keep down that greedy spirit. There is a woman who stirs up the whole neighborhood by her gossiping. She too needs the Shepherd to keep her tongue from deceit and her lips from speaking exaggerations. There is a father whose cursing is ruining his reputation with others. Does he not need the Shepherd's attention?

There isn't a man or woman without some failing, some marking by reason of sin, which makes it easy for the Lord to identify him by his own sin.

Jesus knows each and everyone of you by name. Your faith in Him confirms that you are a sheep of His flock. There is nothing about you He doesn't know. In one way that is very comforting, but yet in another way that terrifies us. "You mean that God knows when I did _____." Yes He does, which is why Jesus came down and became man in the first place. We need a savior; we need someone outside ourselves to reconcile us with our Heavenly Father.

The fact that we are all born infected with the fatal disease; it is called sin reminds me of a story I came across. A visitor saw the shepherds in Nazareth bringing their flocks to water them at the well. When the sheep had drunk their fill, the shepherds called and their sheep followed them. The

visitor asked the shepherds if the sheep always followed their own shepherds when they called them. "Yes," said a shepherd, "except under one condition." "What is that?" "The sheep that do not follow the voice of the shepherd are the sick sheep. If a sheep is healthy, it will always follow the shepherd, but if there is something wrong with the sheep, it will follow anybody."

Sometimes we are like the sick sheep, following anyone and everyone, but the person who is our True Shepherd. We follow along with the fads, and all the newest gadgets, and before we know it we are heading down the path of greed and ambition. We are the sick sheep following anyone, but Jesus and His plan for our lives.

There is good news though, this Advent night. Christ came to save the lost, to heal the sick and bring God's lost children home with Him to heaven. Jesus came in a humble manner, the Almighty became a limited dependant little child born to Mary and Joseph in a manger in the small town of Bethlehem.

He came in order to be the Good Shepherd that He describes in our Gospel lesson for tonight. ² ***The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.*** ³ ***The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*** ⁴ ***When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ...*** ⁹ ***I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.*** ¹⁰ ***The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*** ¹¹ ***"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.***

Jesus did all these things throughout His earthly ministry and ultimately fulfilled through His death on the cross. He willingly laid down His life for the sheep. Being the Good Shepherd Jesus knew that the shepherd accepted absolute responsibility for the sheep. To save you and me Jesus laid down life. But it didn't end there; He laid it down only to take it up again on Easter Morning. All of these amazing things transpired because a son was born in a lowly manger in a quiet little town of Bethlehem.

God doesn't stop using shepherds here though, He invites them to come and witness the birth of His Son into this world. Dirty smelly shepherds are some of the first people that our Lord laid His eyes upon. God's angel came to the shepherds while they were in the fields watching over their flocks and invited them saying: ^{"NIV Luke 2:10} ***But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*** ¹¹ ***Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*** ¹² ***This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.*** ¹³ ***Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*** ¹⁴ ***"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."***

The Shepherds went to see this marvelous sight. One of the most touching parts of the recent movie, **The Nativity Story** is this scene of the poor shepherds coming to worship the new born baby Jesus. The older shepherd reaches out his hand to touch the gentle face of the sleeping Jesus in the arms of

Mary His mother; the shepherd then pauses and dares not to touch the Lord. Mary says that her Son was born for all people everywhere, and gently offers Jesus to be touched by the ragged looking shepherd. What a powerful image, the newborn King of Kings being offered to the lowest person on the social ladder.

God uses normal people in everyday occupations to do miraculous things. God has also invited us this Christmas season, to humbly come and worship to celebrate the birth of His one and only Son into this world. His name is Jesus, because He has saved people from their sins. We are also called by God to go out and invite others to join in the celebration of the most magnificent gift mankind has ever received, God's Son incarnate, ¹² ***This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.***