

The Advent of a Shepherd

Beginning with chapter 40, the Prophet Isaiah begins a section of great hope. He prophesies the exile of the nation in Babylon, which began in 582 BC, but holds out the promise that, after captivity and exile, the Israelites will be allowed to return to their land. That would be joyful, but not the fullness of joy that would accompany the coming of the Messiah, the Shepherd-King.

Follow as I read **Isaiah 40:1-11**:

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.
3 A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
6 A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.
9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,*

*and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.* The word of the Lord.

The imagery of sheep and shepherd, so abundant in Scripture, found its fulfillment in the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, prophesied so graphically by Isaiah. Jesus referred to himself as the shepherd of God who had come to save his lost sheep (Luke 19:10; 15:1-7; Matthew 18:12-14; John 10:1-21).

Isaiah speaks comforting words to the people that assure them that after a time of exile, God will nevertheless remember them and restore them to their land. Although his words had application to their generation, his words found their greater fulfillment with the coming of the Savior, the baby Jesus, who was the Shepherd-King, the Messiah, who came to gather his sheep.

God's people have always been prone to wander, in Isaiah's day and at the time Jesus was born. He came to rescue a scattered and needy people. God's lost, scattered and captive people are the victims of sin, which brings hard service and spiritual warfare. As we know, our real enemy is Satan, whose objective is to destroy us in hell, which is his irrevocable destiny. And if he can't bring us with him to hell, he will torment us as much as possible during our earthly lives. Satan tries to hold us captive to our self-centered objectives and self-destructive behavior. He is the liar who makes false promises, and is the deceiver who tries to blind us from God's truth that says the way to true freedom and fulfillment is through a life of faith in and surrender to the Lordship of Christ.

The analogy of God's people as sheep isn't particularly flattering to us, cute and adorable as are those little new-born lambs! Sheep aren't the most intelligent animals, and are always prone to wander and find themselves in helpless, dangerous situations. They are absolutely dependent on sheep farmers (shepherds) and also, good sheep dogs, who help corral them. Often they don't have enough sense to find their way back into the sheepfold, even when looking straight at the entrance.

One of the most helpful reads on the imagery of sheep and shepherd is Phillip Keller's *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. Keller was an agronomist and sheep farmer in East Africa, who shares insights that make the biblical images come alive. He notes how that in the ancient world, sheep would be always dependent on the shepherd to protect them, not only from thieves and wild animals, but also from themselves, and their constant wanderings into helpless and hopeless situations. He describes "cast down" sheep, "a pathetic sight," of a pregnant ewe, lying on her back, with her feet flaying away. And if the shepherd doesn't arrive shortly, the ewe will die from would-be predators or even from the heat.

All we are like sheep, Isaiah says later in Chapter 53, verse 6, and have gone astray, having turned to our own way toward lost-ness and eventual self-destruction. We are Satan's, but also our own, victims of selfish choices and self-destructive behavior. It's a life of bondage, of hard service, since Satan is a brutal taskmaster. It's a life of spiritual warfare we are destined to lose,

apart from the grace of God. And apart from the rescue of the Shepherd, we are destined for spiritual death. How fragile and how transient is mortal life!

“All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass,” says Isaiah. Regardless of how mighty and permanent mankind and society appear, the inevitability of destruction and death renders everything outside of God and his life as futile. In the face of death, everyone becomes as fragile and impermanent as a blade of grass or fading, dying flower, cut from its stem. The word of God, that brings a message of hope and of judgment, will last forever, as Jesus himself said (verse 8 and Mark 13:31).

How grateful we should be that the Shepherd, when he sees us in our helpless, scattered condition, is moved with compassion and takes action in our behalf! He sees us, as he saw the multitudes in his time on earth, as “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36), and as fading, dying mortals in desperate need of his enduring, life-giving word.

The Shepherd Messiah has compassion, but also will do something for his sheep. Our text speaks of the Sovereign Lord (Adonai Yahweh) coming with power, his arm, that is, power, ruling for him. And his reward is the salvation of his people, or rather, the people, the sheep he has rescued. This work of redemption he did, not by human or political power, but quite to the contrary. This he did through giving himself to die on a cross. God chose to save by way of love and sacrifice and a death that we all deserved to die.

In describing his concern for his lost sheep, Jesus spoke of himself as the Shepherd who left the ninety-nine in his fold to go rescue the one lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7). This speaks of his love for each one of us, and his commitment to die for us, even for each one of us individually. The Shepherd not only sees, but he also seeks after his sheep (Luke 19:10). And, he calls his sheep by name (John 10:27). Sheep depend on the voice of their shepherd to call them to follow and to lead them in the right path.

Years ago, when Nancy and I were in the Holy Land, we were amazed by the way Scriptural images seem to take on new life there in the setting of the Bible. One such occasion was watching young shepherd boys leading their sheep, and noting how that often herds of sheep and goats would mingle together, and then, when one shepherd was ready to move his flock, he would simply stand up, and call his sheep, and his would follow him.

The voice crying in the wilderness (verse 3) was understood in the Gospels to be that of John the Baptist, whose preaching of repentance prepared hearts to receive the message of Jesus (Mark 1:1-4). But we too have heard the voice calling to us in our wilderness and spiritual desert. And, as John the Baptist preached, we had to prepare the way for Jesus to come with salvation through hearing and repenting. By grace alone the way is made ready for Jesus to enter our hearts.

Isaiah pictures the Messiah as a shepherd who tends, gathers, carries and leads, all action verbs of giving. And so Jesus identified himself as the Good Shepherd who cares for and gives even himself for his sheep (John 10:11,15, 28). How different from the false shepherds!

Phillip Keller describes the tenant farmer who raised sheep on the farm adjacent to his sheep farm. He noted that he was “the most indifferent manager” he had ever met. His land and sheep were neglected, and thus had to forage poor grassland for themselves. They often fell prey to dogs, big cats and rustlers. In the wintertime, they were never given enough hay or grain or even adequate shelter. They had only muddy water to drink, and Keller recalls how sad and sickly they appeared, as they huddled close to the fence, across from Keller’s well-cared-for sheep. He noted that the tenant farmer “couldn’t care less,” noting that this is the way Satan regards those in his kingdom, his flock of darkness and lost-ness.

Apart from the grace of God, leading us into his green pastures of eternal and abundant life, we’re under the sway of a tyrannous master, Satan. He’s a thief and robber of the sheep, Jesus says (John 10:8). Whatever Satan and his world promises, there is eventual and inevitable disappointment. If not until the end of life, there will be the futile awareness that the real meaning and purpose of life has been missed. Israel had a history of some relatively good leaders and a lot of misleaders of the people of God, as we do today. Israelites longed for a return to the days of King David, the Shepherd King. The Messiah, Isaiah says, will be greater than David. As the Shepherd King, he gives his life for his sheep. In John’s Good Shepherd passage, Jesus says that he, unlike the hired hand who cares nothing for the sheep, risks and even gives his life for the sheep (John 10:11-18).

Isaiah’s message of comfort is possible because a loving God cares for his sheep. He could announce that a double payment (verse 2) has been received because of the death of the Messiah which Isaiah prophesies in chapter 53. The double payment idea is that God didn’t give the minimum. He gave his best—his only Son (John 3:16).

The Lord’s reward and delight is his people. The imagery of the shepherd tells us something about our relationship as sheep with the Shepherd. A shepherd really enjoys his sheep. I talked with a lady visiting our church in Belgium, whose daughter and son-in-law are sheep farmers in France. They abandoned lucrative careers in order to do something they enjoy, roughing it with the sheep! “It’s hard work,” the mother said, “but they wouldn’t give it up for anything.” So Jesus truly delights in us.

And the danger in the church is that we get so used to saying things the right way, and we become so accustomed to religious biblical talk that we let the meaning and significance wear thin and even slip away. We speak of things like God’s love and grace and even argue over ideas that have long since failed to impact us, much less cause us to wonder and to stand amazed. We must realize the incredible love and delight God has in us his sheep. It would make us more joyful, and our worship would take on the dimension of a real

celebration. Our lives, worship and fellowship should be like “Christmas all year long.”

Keller describes one of his ewe sheep he named “Mrs. Gad-about.” This sheep caused him more problems, he said, than all the rest of his sheep combined. She was always looking for a place in the fence she could crawl under and escape the confinement of the greener pastures. “She was never contented with things as they were,” and yet her rebellious foolishness always led her to trouble, both for herself and young lambs, who sometimes would follow her into trouble and danger.

The Good Shepherd cares about us, even when we have been fence crawlers and have strayed into destructive habits and unwise choices. He leaves the ninety-nine and seeks us out. As Keller says, this kind of sheep needs constant attention, and would not survive long without a caring shepherd. Regardless of our being often wayward and stubborn, the Good Shepherd is there always to rescue, restore and guide us.

Keller mentions also that he would brand his sheep on the ear, taking a sharp knife and cutting a notch in the ear, and the notch was a symbol of his distinct ownership. So, we know that as God’s sheep, we have been marked by the blood of the Lamb, and our names are written indelibly in the Lamb’s book of life (Revelation 3:5; 21:27, etc.). Jesus is the Shepherd who loves and cares for us, and who knows all about us. He rejoices with us and he hurts with us, and he grieves over our being hurt. Those who hurt us hurt him. We enjoy his constant love and care.

And we have comfort also in knowing *the ultimate destiny of his sheep*. The Shepherd carries us with direction and purpose. He is taking us somewhere. The 23rd Psalm ends with the Shepherd leading his sheep to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have to, along the way, walk through the dangerous and foreboding “valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23:4). The Christian life isn’t one of living on “flowery beds of ease.” But we have the greatest joy and security of all—Jesus Christ himself, always holding us and always loving us. And he is always leading us toward the glorious destiny that belongs to the children of God.

“The glory of the Lord shall be revealed” (5). Someday the Shepherd will be fully revealed to us, face to face. Then we will see his full glory and will be transformed into his glorious likeness. That will be the Second Advent of our good and great Shepherd.