

**SERMON TITLE-** "The Good Shepherd"

**TEXT-** Isaiah 40:11

**PREACHED AT-** Neighbourhood Church

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As we journey through Isaiah we are picking up themes that reoccur in the Scriptures. In many cases Isaiah is the first OT writer to paint a particular picture. In the case of today's picture he is neither the person who introduces it, nor even the OT writer who uses it the most.

But last week we touched on a picture that Isaiah did use which is very much a part of the panorama of his oracle.

**He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. Isaiah 40:11**

That picture of the Shepherd who cares for His sheep is the climax of the comfort that God's people have- people who recognize that they are mere grass.

Where does Isaiah get the picture of God, as a shepherd? Likely half of the children here could answer that question- Psalm 23 of course-

**1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.**

**2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, 3 he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.**

**4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

**5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**

**6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Psalm 23**

That may be one of the most famous and loved Biblical images. Isaiah brings that picture to the table as he speaks to his people about what God wants from His people. God is the Good Shepherd to His people.

A couple of weeks back, Ryan preached another great sermon and because of the magic of our web site I was able to read it. One of his introductory points was- we need to understand why certain beliefs and images are important. That is what keeps them from becoming clichés. He specifically brought up God/Jesus as shepherd. Why do we need a shepherd? The point of his sermon was not to answer that question but the peace question.

So today we are going to look at the "shepherd" metaphor and what it means to us.

Looking at this we see that there are 2 obvious pieces to this metaphor-

### **#1. God Is Our Shepherd**

That is what Psalm 23 tells us and for 3000 years that Psalm has been a comfort to people during difficult times. We go through valleys of the shadow of death and God. There are nice cards and sayings that are heart warming. There are beautiful scenes that we can sit back and enjoy at the end of a long day.

But when times are hard- just seeing a beautiful scene is seldom enough- but a

picture that reminds us of safety and peace when we feel neither safe nor peaceful- that is something you can hang on to. And people do.

But that leads us to Ryan's question- what does the picture of God as shepherd tell us? What does that say about God? It says a great deal but for now we will look at the very core meanings.

### **1. God loves us**

That is the core of the Biblical story from the beginning to the end. It is captured in images in every part of the Bible. Famously John 3:16 says, "**For God so loved the world . . .**"

Last week I briefly alluded to an image that we can understand better than a shepherd and sheep. We are a culture of pets and these pets are loved deeply by their owners. The language of a pet and its owner is, I believe, a very good example of the love that is illustrated throughout the Bible in the shepherd and sheep imagery. It is an irrational affection. Why would a shepherd, as in Jesus' story of the lost lamb, leave his large flock and go on a desperate mission to find a single and otherwise insignificant little lamb?

Why would the shepherd put his life at risk, trying to rescue this little lamb from various dangers?

The whole point of the story is that the love is disproportionate. It is the same love that people have for their pets when fire goes through a house and pet owners are often willing to put their own lives at risk to rescue the pet. John 3:16 talks about this disproportionate love of God for us "**For God so loved the world . . . that He gave His one and only Son . . .**"

That makes no logical sense and repeatedly, those who are looking for critiques of God point out its unbalanced nature. What kind of a Father would do such a thing? That is the whole point of the verse. God's love for us does not make sense in the normal sense of the word. It makes no sense that a person who risk life and limb for a dog or a cat- but people do because they love their pets.

That is an illustration of God's love for us.

God the Shepherd loves His "sheep."

But there is another side to this story that is part of the metaphor-

### **2. God loves us from a superior place**

The love that a shepherd has for his sheep- the love that a pet owner has for their pet- and the love that God has for us- is not a love between equals.

For this love to be properly understood- and not be misused this position of superiority has to be understood and acknowledged.

Why is this important? A sheep or a pet obviously can't understand something that people are supposed to understand- and that is that the love offered to us is a gift. That it is not something we merit.

Hence the language of grace. Unless we understand grace we can easily come to see ourselves as deserving God's care for us. Once we start thinking we deserve God's favour- what was a good relationship changes.

A love between equals, such as friends or in a marriage has quite a different nature than a love from a superior place. The easiest place to see the problems of mixing this up is when parents, while their children are still very young, try to deal with them as equals or even as peer friendships. That creates an unhealthy relationship from every

angle.

We are sheep and God is the shepherd. We are loved from above. God is not our peer in any sense of the concept. He is God and we are His creation. We have no more to say to God about how He does things than does a sheep have to say to its shepherd- or a cat to its owner.

If there is one area that we moderns struggle with it is the idea of God being God and not somehow being on a peer level with Him.

But the picture of the Shepherd makes this point very clear- God is God and we are not.

And this brings us to the 2nd aspect of this metaphor-

## **#2. We Are Sheep**

For the most part understanding God as shepherd focuses on the character of God- but this part of the metaphor focuses on the character of people.

If we are “sheep” what does this say about us? Obviously we are not shepherds. There is a big distinction between. And what are our traits in this?

### **1. We can't survive without help.**

The nature of the pet and the sheep, in this metaphor is that it is dependant on its master for survival. If you have a pet, that pet depends on you to feed and shelter it. If you go away and leave your pet in the house- that pet will eventually die.

This is what distinguishes a domestic dog from a wolf or coyote and a cat from a bobcat or cougar. The wild animal is designed to survive without a “shepherd” while the domestic animal is designed to be taken care of.

The sheep does not survive without the shepherd leading it to places of food and water during the day and back to the pen for protection, at night.

Without the shepherd providing food and water the sheep would starve to death and without the protection of the pen, predators would ravish the flock.

How does that apply to us as people under God? It means that in big and little ways we humans are designed to live in a relationship of God's care.

Just as sheep are distinguished from the wild animals by their domestication so human beings are distinguished from the rest of the animal kingdom by their nature as creatures under the care of God.

This “domestication” is a metaphor that needs to be understood. At a purely physical level we are more than capable of surviving in the world, just as any wild animal.

What distinguishes us from them is our search for meaning and purpose. Animals don't crave to know and understand the way people do.

That craving for meaning and purpose is what God directs His people towards- just as the shepherd directs his sheep towards, food and water during the day and to shelter from predators during the night.

And understanding that God's relationship to people surrounds exactly this drive for purpose and meaning- and not merely looking after a roof over our heads and groceries in the cupboard.

It is when people misunderstand this that they get quite mixed up. God has provided us and every creature on earth with a wonderful world of provisions.

We need the help of the Good Shepherd. Without His care we put ourselves a risk

and will not survive.

There is another, very unflattering aspect of the metaphor-

## **2. We need sheep “herding”**

No one who understood about sheep would ever have missed this point. Sheep were not the brightest animals known to the people of the time. Sheep had 2 primary purposes- their wool and their meat- unlike horses who carried a rider, or the ox which could be used to carry things or pull things, for example, no one needed a sheep to do anything more than stay healthy and stay around. After that the sheep just had to be sheep. When the time came they would be either sheared or eaten or both. They didn't need brains and it seems they didn't have many.

Now people do have brains- and this is important in the metaphor but out of this brainless quality of sheep come 2 aspects that the metaphor does want us to understand to remind us that we are to engage our brains.

**First, sheep do stupid things that cause themselves harm.** Where does this “stupidity” come from? Mostly from a failure to recognize the longer term consequences of choices. If eating the the pleasure of the moment- then nothing but eating is important. Sheep don't think about the fact that you don't just need to eat today- you will also need to eat tomorrow.

Also if a sheep gets curious about a butterfly or a cloud in the sky, it can be quite oblivious about danger that may be lurking around. Sheep, unlike wild animals don't have the same instincts for danger that wild animals have.

It is one of the reasons that domestic animals are far easier pickings for predators than are wild animals.

What does this say about people? While we do have brains that should protect us, the pleasures of the moment are a real danger that we must be aware of.

We do have brains that are designed to help us think about the future and the consequences of our actions but our natural inclinations are the same as those of sheep.

Those people who don't live for the pleasure of the moment actually stand out from the rest of us. Moses was one of those and is described this way-

**He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. Hebrews 11:25**

Isaiah describes us with this poignant comment-

**We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way . . . Isaiah 53:6**

So why do we need shepherding? because we tend to drift away from the path of safety and good sense. Psalm 23 talk about the fact that the Good Shepherd's rod and staff comfort him. They comfort him, of course because they are good weapons to use against enemies- but they are also comforting because they are used to tap and direct the sheep to the place where they should go.

We need the shepherding reminder that not every inclination that rolls through our brains is wise beyond the pleasure of the moment.

But there is another quality of sheep that seems to be almost contrary to the previous one. Sheep can wander off but-

**Secondly, like most herding animals they tend move as a group.**

On the one hand a sheep can easily wander away from the safety of the flock- on the other hand- if the flock is moving in a dangerous direction- the sheep seem to automatically go along with it.

Sheep and other herd animals are notorious for running into extreme danger just because everyone else is doing it.

When a shepherd wants to move a flock of sheep- he can do so most easily by keeping the flock together and moving them from the edges.

And by doing this sheep can actually be driven right over a cliff. Once the first few sheep leap off the cliff, to their death, those behind them just keep following.

This is such a powerful picture of human behaviour. As long as the crowd is doing something we feel like there is a confirmation that everything will be OK. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact history tends to show that when we wander from the crowd we wander into danger and when we wander with the crowd we follow them into calamity.

It sounds like a lose, lose scenario.

But that is exactly why the Shepherd is so important. The role of the Shepherd is to herd the sheep to the places of safety and health.

When our inclination is to wander off on our own the Shepherd direct us back into the flock, where we are designed to live.

When the flock moves off in a catastrophic direction, the Shepherd becomes the leader and leads the flock to the places of safety.

### **#3. Unlike Sheep- We Can And Must Choose**

The metaphor of the Shepherd and the Sheep teaches us a great deal about the nature of God and our own natures but the metaphor is also designed to teach and the teaching point is a point of contrast.

The nature of a sheep is such that you don't teach them by metaphors and parables. If you want to teach a sheep you do it simply on the basis of reward and punishment. Trying to teach sheep or any other pet using a parable is a waste of time because that type of learning is not in their natures.

But God does teach us using metaphors because we have an ability to choose right from wrong in a way that animals don't.

We are called to choose to obey the directions of the Shepherd out of our volition not merely because His rod and staff keep us on the path He was set out for us.

And this distinction is what makes a sheep or other pet different from that of a son or daughter. There is a great deal of the training and direction that is the same between animals and children- but it is the differences that put the responsibility on us.

Yes, sheep cannot seem understand the longer term consequences of their actions- but we can.

Yes sheep move as a flock, even when obvious danger lies ahead- but you and I know that just because everyone is doing it- does not make it right. And we have more than enough examples of the majority being wrong that we should be able to remember this.

We can choose to give our actions, sober thought rather than relying on the flock instinct.

We are called to choose the right way- and at the end of the day- this is what God,

our Good Shepherd hopes for, from us.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the metaphor is to show us the character of God. We need to understand this.

The other purpose of the metaphor is to show us the character of humanity [you and me]. We also need to understand this.

The final purpose is to have us behave as thinking, choosing people, following the right path because it is the right path.

600 years after Isaiah, Jesus takes the picture of the Shepherd and the Sheep and specifically makes it His own.

**"I am the good shepherd . . ." John 10:11 & 14**

Next week we will look at some of the Kingdom conclusions that He makes for us using that metaphor.