

**Sermon File # 926**

**Scripture Text: Isaiah 40:1-11**

**Sermon Title: *The Birth of a Shepherd***

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**Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.**

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## ***The Birth of a Shepherd***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles with me to Isaiah 40:1-11. Today is the fourth sermon in our Advent series from the Prophet Isaiah, as we consider passages that contain great Messianic prophecies about the coming of the Savior. We have noted passages about the light shining in the darkness (9:1-11), the birth of Immanuel, God with us who died for us (7:14; 52:13-53:12), the birth of a King (11:1-9) and today we look at the birth of a Shepherd. Beginning with chapter 40 of Isaiah, 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 a time of punishment, the Israelites will be allowed to return to their land. Our text for today is actually the prologue for the remainder of Isaiah, containing a great message about the basis for Israel's hope.

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would come into a world of darkness and hopelessness as a savior-shepherd. Isaiah's time was spiritually dark. And then there would be the defeat of Israel, then Judah, and a time of captivity and exile in Babylon. Then would follow a release from exile and the return to their land. That would be joyful, but not the fullness of joy that would accompany the coming of the Messiah. He would be born into a world of darkness and disillusionment, and would bring the comfort of salvation and hope of everlasting life.

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

The imagery of sheep and shepherds is an important part of the biblical story. Over 400 times there are references to sheep and flocks, and approximately 100 references to shepherds and shepherding (See *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, et. al.). In that agrarian, nomadic culture, sheep were important for the livelihood of the people, as well as for their worship, being often used for sacrifices. Sheep made a graphic metaphor for people, and the image of a shepherd is important for the revelation of the Lord, as we see especially in passages like the 80<sup>th</sup> and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalms. The Old Testament patriarchs were shepherds, and Moses and David were particularly prophetic types of the Messiah Shepherd who was to come.

All of this biblical imagery of sheep and shepherd 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). I like the way the great 19<sup>th</sup> Century London preacher, CH Spurgeon, summarized the role of Jesus as shepherd of his people. He noted that, in the words of Jesus himself, he was the Good Shepherd, being good in his love, self-giving and death for his sheep (John 10: 1-21). Hebrews calls Jesus the Great Shepherd, noting that Jesus was great in his resurrection (Hebrews 13:20). And Peter notes that Jesus will be great in his glorious Second Coming as the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4; CH Spurgeon, Volume/Year 1865, Pages 541ff, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*).

We will note all three of these aspects of the Shepherd-Savior in our text, which is matched only by the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in its depiction of the Messiah as our shepherd. Christmas is a celebration of the birth of a shepherd, and as our Shepherd...

### **He gathers his sheep**

The Prophet 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.

#### *His sheep are scattered*

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 people and needy people.

In verse 2 of our text, we note the comforting message of the cessation of "hard service" (NIV), which is more literally translated as "warfare" (ESV). 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. Sin does bring the consequences of emptiness and disillusionment. 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 is not particularly flattering, cute and adorable as are those little new-born lambs! (A few weeks ago my wife couldn't resist buying an adorable toy lamb for our granddaughter.) Sheep are not 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 do not have enough sense to find their way back into the sheepfold, even when looking straight at the entrance (Pages 782-784, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Leland Ryken, et. al., editors).

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 agrologist 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 (Pages 60-61).

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!

Verse 6 reminds us of that truth. "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall," 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 move 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.

*He has purchased and he rescues his sheep*

The Shepherd Messiah has compassion, but also the will do something for his sheep. Verse 10 of 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.

*He calls and his sheep hear his voice*

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.

Our text speaks of “the mouth of the Lord” (verse 5) and the everlasting word of God (verse 8). Jesus emphasized the importance of his words as the authoritative word of God saying, “Truly I say to you.” Any of us who are standing in grace today are doing so because the Shepherd has spoken his word to our hearts. Even though the word was heard by unbelievers, they didn’t respond in faith. Thus they didn’t have ears to hear unto salvation (Matthew 13:1-23).

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 was made ready for Jesus to enter our hearts. By grace through faith alone, we got up and followed Jesus as sheep of his pasture. Some say they cannot believe the words of Jesus and cannot have enough faith for salvation. Yet everyone must respond whenever Jesus calls. If we open the door and prepare the

way with our openness and willingness to believe, he will enter and do his work of grace. Those who say they can't believe have a moral problem—the unwillingness to forsake sin and unbelief and submit to the lordship of the Shepherd.

We celebrate the birth of a Shepherd, and also as our Shepherd...

### **He gives to his sheep**

Verse 11 shows us a picture of 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!*

The Prophet Ezekiel especially spoke against false shepherds, both civic and religious leaders, who were false leaders who ravaged and abused the flock, God's people, for their own selfish and sinful advantage (Ezekiel 34:5, 12). And Isaiah was alluding also to this same problem.

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 (Pages 28-29, above citation).

Apart from the grace of God, leading us into his green pastures of eternal and abundant life, we are under the sway of a tyrannous master, Satan. He is 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.

We're all aware of false prophets and miss-leaders of naïve followers, who were led to disillusionment and eventual destruction, in places like Jonestown, Guyana and Waco, Texas. In contrast to these obviously false and deadly leaders, most false prophets today are disguised as the light-angels of materialism, financial and worldly success, and the pursuit of pleasure and personal happiness that end in tragedy, lost opportunity and spiritual shipwreck. Sometimes these false leaders wear the guise of ministerial garb, with weekly and daily religious telecasts. (Even this past week, I was saddened to learn how a Baptist pastor from Texas, USA, had exploited and trafficked a young boys' choir from Zambia. He had promised these young

boys that the money they received from their concerts in US churches would be given for their education in the US and to support their families in Zambia. Instead, this deceptive “minister” kept the money for his own greedy use.) More often the false leaders are personal ideologies that are the norm of our worldly, materialistic and self-centered age.

Israel had a history of some relatively good leaders and a lot of misleaders of the people of God. And they 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*

The salvation that Isaiah prophesied would be fulfilled through the suffering and death of the Messiah whom Isaiah pictures as the suffering and dying Lamb of God (Isaiah 53:1-6). Our Savior King is both the Good Shepherd and the sacrificed Lamb of God.

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. He with everlasting foreknowledge as the Son of God, gave 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. This double payment is through the death of Jesus that removes our guilt and also gives us the gift of his righteousness and eternal life. The double payment idea is that God didn’t give the minimum. He gave his best—his only Son (John 3:16).

Years ago I saw the tombstone in London of the great pastor and hymn-writer, Augustus Toplady, who wrote the favorite, *Rock of Ages*. I recalled those words, “Be of sin the double cure, saved from wrath and made me pure.” The death and resurrection of Jesus, the Rock of Ages, is indeed the double cure of salvation from God’s wrath and salvation to a life of holiness to be consummated in heaven. Our guilt for sin and the power of sin are removed. And we are released from our “hard service,” when we were bound to a life of unrewarding sin and self-living. And we are given peace from our inner and social warfare (Verse 2). Our complete liberty has been paid for by the Shepherd. And...

*He delights in his sheep*

In verse 10, the Sovereign Lord is pictured as coming in power as the victor in battle. He comes in victorious procession with his reward and recompense. Christ’s suffering and death on the cross was compensated by the joy before him (Hebrews 12:2). That joy was the salvation of his people. 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. Reading

Keller's book tells me that a shepherd really enjoys his sheep. I talked with a lady visiting our church several years ago 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."

I received an e-mail from a missionary and pastor friend, who had served here in Belgium. Recently his job assignment changed, and he is no longer pastoring a local church. He sent this reply:

..."I hope that everything is going well at IBC. I really miss pastoring during Advent and Christmas. It was always so fun, and nearly everyone was in a good mood! That is always nice one month of the year..."

Why is everyone in the church in a good mood just one month a year? Is it because we don't realize the amazing love of Jesus for us, and we haven't learned to rejoice in his love for us as we learn to love and delight in and enjoy him? If the Christmas Season is so much fun for Christians, why aren't the day after and the first Monday back at work after the holidays? Do we simply decide to limit how much delight we have in Jesus and choose to ignore how much he loves us and delights in us? Why can't we have the joy of Christ's birth all the time, and be in a mood of rejoicing in Jesus, our Savior, who lovingly carries us in his arms, in fact, close to his heart (Verse 11)?

Finally, this Christmas we celebrate the fact that as our Shepherd...

### **He guards and guides his sheep**

Our text speaks of this caring Shepherd Messiah, who tends, gathers, carries and leads his sheep (Verse 11). Also, in verses 6-8 we see how, in contrast to our mortal frailty and total dependence, his breath and the power of his word give and take away and also sustain life.

And when we by grace become sheep in his fold, nothing can take us out of his secure and strong arm and hand (Verse 10 and John 10: 28ff). He protects from anything that would harm us, even ourselves and our own foolish choices (Romans 8:31-39).

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 (Pages 32-33, above citation).

The Good Shepherd cares about us, even when we have been fence crawlers and have strayed into destructive habits and sinful 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.

On one of the BBC television channels, we watched a Border Collie sheep dog competition from the UK. The dogs from Scotland won out over the Irish in a tough competition that involved these brilliantly trained dogs herding a bunch of stubborn sheep through a maze of gates and between fences, and finally into a corral. Next to the brilliant training and intelligence of these dogs, I was impressed by the stubbornness of the sheep that resisted every effort by shepherders and dogs to get them into the corral.

Regardless of our being often wayward and stubborn, the Good Shepherd is there always to guide us.

And as his sheep we have...

*The absolute security of his sheep*

Our text underscores the contrasting frailty of God’s people and the permanence and power of his word and of the Shepherd Messiah. As Jesus said, as the Good Shepherd he is the gate for the sheepfold (John 10:9). In the ancient world, the gate of the sheepfold was often the shepherd himself, who would lie down to sleep across the entrance to the fold. Any thief would enter had to climb over him. Any sheep who would wander would have to step over the shepherd.

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.). The Prophet Zechariah told the people of God that anyone who harms them “touches the apple of his eye” (Zechariah 2:8). 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.

This is the assurance we need to pray for our brothers and sisters around the world today in the persecuted church. Although they are not sheltered from pain and suffering, they are God’s beloved sheep who will be finally delivered, vindicated and rewarded.

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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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.

"And the glory of the Lord will be revealed" (Verse 5). The glory was revealed that first Christmas night. "Glory to God in the highest," announced the angels (Luke 2:14). God's glory is the display of his likeness, his person, and his properties of wealth and greatness. And to glorify God is to acknowledge and proclaim these attributes of God. And as Paul said, God has shared his glory with everyone one of us who calls himself or herself a Christian. And the glory we have is greater than that which Moses experienced, even on the holy mountain when his face shone with radiance. Paul says his glory was tangible, but also temporal and fading. The glory we receive isn't so physical, although I think glory-filled Christians do appear different from the people of the world. Our glory is inner, and comes when the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus shines into our hearts. It's the converting work of the Holy Spirit that transforms us into becoming God's children. And the same Holy Spirit of glory keeps changing us more into the likeness of Jesus. Our destiny is to keep becoming like Jesus until God's sanctifying work is done (2 Corinthians 3:7-4:6).

**Conclusion:**

The voice is crying in the wilderness about the coming of the Shepherd. Isaiah was a voice crying out the Good News, about Israel's future hope of deliverance and release from exile. The angels announced good tidings of great joy for all the people. It was John the Baptist who announced Jesus coming just before his public ministry. Here in verse 9 the NIV may not be the best translation. More accurately it is the people of Zion/Jerusalem, not the Prophet Isaiah, who get up on the high mountain and declare the Good News, and who say to the cities along the way, "Your God is coming!" (See the *New Living Translation*). And the church continues to bring the good news of God's salvation. And we who have been changed by that good news, who have been released from hard labor and spiritual warfare, have something to talk about this Christmas Season. The American folk carol gets it right when it says, "Go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born."

We have heard the saying, "Timing is everything." And this is true for seeing the glory of the Lord. Our text tells us that "the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it" (Verse 5). We who belong to Jesus, who have seen his glory by faith, will be enraptured to see the full disclosure of his glory. This will far exceed anything we now can see by faith, a "light display" that will make all Christmas displays pale by contrast. And yet all mankind together will see it, but not with rapturous joy. Paul notes this also when he writes that some day at the name of Jesus "every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). This doesn't mean that everyone will see the glory with welcoming joy, but that many, those who have rejected Jesus as Lord, will confess that they have been sinfully and tragically wrong to not have confessed him in faith and repentance and submission.

Wartime German pastor and theologian, Helmut Thielicke addressed the claims of those who putatively have died and returned to life. Some of these testify to having seen a glorious light and having heard music that exceeded all they had ever heard on earth, as they "walked down the corridor of light," into what they thought must have been the presence of God. These who thus testified, Thielicke noted, included unbelievers as well as orthodox, believing Christians. This led to the erroneous conclusion that the same fate awaits us all, whether believers or unbelievers. We will all see the glory of God, they assumed.

But wait! Didn't Paul say that even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light? (2 Corinthians 11:14). Thielicke then added that upon entering eternity, all will stand before holy God. Unbelievers will then behold, at least on the periphery of God's presence, a glory they could never have imagined. And then they will say things like, "There *is* a God, after all." I was mistaken. And Christ is the Savior and Lord. All those things I heard and read about, and rejected as naïve superstition, are all true. There is salvation. There is an eternal heaven and hell. And, what beauty and glory there is in the presence of God! This is the joy, purpose, meaning and fulfillment that were missing all throughout my earthly life of sinful, self-centered living." And Thielicke concludes that God will then say, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:23). The eternity of unbelievers will be everlasting regret in final and complete separation from God and all that is good.

It's a serious thing to have heard the Good News about the Shepherd Messiah, because he is also the Lord and the righteous Judge of all the earth. The Christmas message is not just about love and grace, good will and peace on earth. It's about the judgment that comes from the Good, Great and Chief Shepherd, who will divide his sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). The Christmas story is not one that can be taken lightly. Good news is terribly important. It was for exiled Israel. It was for those dwelling in darkness when Jesus came the first time. It's terribly important for us today and those living around us. I want everyone that I care about to know that a Good, Great and Chief Shepherd has been born for them.

**Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. List some attributes of sheep that make them a fitting analogy for God's people.
2. In what ways does God speak to call his sheep (people) to salvation?
3. What are some of the notorious false shepherds of recent years and perhaps in today's world?
4. What are some of the more subtle false shepherds, perhaps general ideologies that are leading people astray/away from the truth?
5. Use the four verbs in verse 11 that describe the actions of the Shepherd Messiah and describe how each was and is fulfilled by Jesus.
6. Our text speaks of the delight God has in his people. We are the reward and recompense for Jesus in his suffering and death (Verse 10), and as his sheep, we are the object of his love and care (Verse 11). Why is it that as Christians we speak and think so little of the joy and delight that God has in us? Why is it that we fail so often to enjoy God our Father and Christ our Shepherd?
7. Think of someone that you know who needs to know and trust Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and think about the opportunity you might have this Christmas to "bring good tidings" of salvation to him/her. Would you make this a matter of prayer during this week before Christmas day?

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