

**Christmas Eve + December 24, 2016**  
**Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit**  
**Luke 2:1-20**  
Nancy Raabe, Pastor

I am a city girl. Well, not exactly – I grew up in what was then a semi-rural part of Southern California, surrounded by orange groves and vineyards. But that scene is long gone and my hometown of Cucamonga is now part of the asphalt jungle of greater Los Angeles. At any rate, I have always held a romantic view of farms and especially farm animals, so am touched and honored to know how many of you grew up on farms and are so familiar with these animals.

For this reason I find *fascinating* the role that the shepherds play in our Christmas story. Why shepherds? Why would God choose members of one of the lowliest professions in Biblical society to be witnesses to the greatest news the world has ever known, and then to be the first to bring that news to others? Why not priests or kings to announce the Savior's birth?

Shepherds in the ancient world were not always regarded as lowly, which makes Luke's story even more compelling. In early nomadic societies, nearly everyone was a shepherd. But as the tribes of Israel migrated to Egypt they encountered a more agricultural lifestyle where farmers despised shepherds because the flocks would encroach on their fields and plunder crops. In fact, this dynamic accounts for the first murder in the Bible: We are told Cain was a tiller of the ground and Abel a keeper of sheep.

By the time of the prophets, a few centuries before Christ's birth, shepherds had come to symbolize social desolation. In general, they were considered second-class and untrustworthy. By Christ's time they were victims of religious snobbery and class prejudice. Rabbis not only branded them as sinners, but they banned the pasturing of sheep and goats in Israel, except on open areas away from cities—which is why the shepherds in Luke's story were living in the fields some distance

from the town of Bethlehem. Our Christmas imagery pictures them as alone in the dark in a wide open place, and the skyline of Bethlehem very small and far away.

But if you think about the entirety of Scripture, arguably the most powerful image of God's caretaking in both the Old and New Testaments is that of a shepherd! How can this be? How is it that such a humble vocation provides the central metaphor for God in the story of salvation? What are the qualities of shepherds that the writers of Holy Scripture found to be so compelling?

**1. The shepherd knows how to gather sheep that have been scattered.** This is especially necessary when sheep have to be led back into the fold or guided to another pasture. It is accomplished by the shepherd standing in the center of the scattered flock and calling to them in a certain way that they recognize. A slingshot can be used to strike with little pebbles those who aren't paying attention. Not until all the sheep are gathered does the shepherd then start to lead them to the new place. We find this reflected in Ezekiel 34: "As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness."

**2. The shepherds leads the sheep through dangerous times and situations.** The love of the shepherd for his sheep is best seen in special times of need. A good example is crossing a stream of water. The shepherd leads the way into the water. Those sheep who always stay close to the shepherd plunge in right after him. Others enter with hesitation and alarm; some may miss the fording spot and are carried downstream a bit, but for any who begin to get swept away, the shepherd quickly jumps in and rescues them, holding each close to his chest. When all have crossed safely they gather around the shepherd as if to express their thankfulness. Isaiah 43:2: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you."

**3. The shepherd makes sure there is enough food in all seasons.** In the springtime there is an abundance of green pasture, and after the harvest the sheep are often allowed to graze through what remains, feasting on fresh growth, dried blades or an occasional ear of corn left behind. When these are exhausted the shepherd moves on to find other sources of food. From Isaiah 40: "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd."

**4. The shepherd finds those who become lost.** It was very important that sheep not be allowed to stray, because on their own sheep are completely helpless. In such a condition they become bewildered and confused because sheep have no sense of location. So the shepherd must go to whatever lengths are needed to find and bring back any lost sheep. This is the use of his rod and

staff, not only for guiding them but the rod for periodic counting and the staff for snagging those who have strayed away and gently pulling them back. From Psalm 119: “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek out your servant.” And Psalm 23: He restores my soul; he leads me in paths of righteousness.”

**5. The shepherd cares for the sick and wounded.** He is always on the lookout for members of the flock that need special attention. Some lambs suffer from excessive sun, while others are badly scratched by thorns. A common remedy is olive oil, which the shepherd always carries in good supply in a ram’s horn. Psalm 23: “You anoint my head with oil.”

**6. The shepherd knows the sheep intimately.** He cares deeply for each one in his flock. He gives them pet names, perhaps because of something that happened to them or some distinguishing characteristic. A good shepherd knows them each so well that, blindfolded, he can feel a sheep’s face and tell if it is one of his. John 10: “I am the good shepherd, and I know my sheep.”

So we can see that the profession of the shepherd—the good shepherd—embodies all those characteristics of our Savior himself. He **gathers** us together in community through his church. He **leads** us with his steadfast love and faithfulness through all dangers and trials of this life. He **feeds** us in all season with his abundant Word. He **seeks** and finds all who become lost, never giving up on us. He **tends** to us when we are wounded, pouring down his healing power through the Holy Spirit. And he **knows** each of us intimately, calling us by a name that defines us alone as a unique child of God.

It may help us to get to know God better, to grow closer to him, if we think of ourselves as sheep. Isaiah writes, “All we, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to our own way.” Isn’t that a colorful description of our own lives of faith—we want to be with God but we continually turn away, getting distracted by worldly attachments and making those more important than God?

So, thinking of ourselves using these same images of the shepherd: To be **gathered** back into the flock, we must be listening for the shepherd’s voice. To be **led** through dangerous times and situations, we must be willing to follow him, trusting in his guidance. To be **fed** we must be willing to eat, and first, to admit we are hungry—hungry for God’s Word. To **be found when we become lost**

we must be willing to be found—not continually running away. To be **cared for** as one who is wounded, we must acknowledge the reality of our wounds and what they are, and we must desire to be healed. And to be **known intimately** we must first know and love ourselves and believe we are worthy to be known.

But it is not only for these qualities that God chose the shepherds to be the first human messengers of the news of Christ's birth—but also *because* of their very lowliness on the ladder of society. For who better to testify to the God who himself stoops to become lowly, just like us, that we may know HIM just as he knows us? God comes to us not as mighty king on a throne but as a baby, completely dependent for survival on parents, caregivers, nurses, the community. God became powerless that the completion of God's mission depends on us.

“Christ was born to save,” we are about to sing. We know this, and we know the way it happened. Now let us carry this news out into the world. Let our words be filled with wonder, love, and joy, so that those we tell may be amazed at what we say, just as those first recipients of the shepherds' news in Bethlehem were amazed at what the shepherds told them. And let us return to our place of worship, week after week, as Luke says of the shepherds, “glorifying and praising God for all we have heard and seen, as it has been told to us.”

AMEN!