

The Shepherd Picture

Surely this is one of our most beloved images of God: the Shepherd. It is also a beloved part of our images of Christmas. In many a nativity scene the shepherd is there somewhere. Too often just kind of lurking in the background with the sheep. The classical painters gave them more opportunity to be close up to the manger, adoring the baby. We have one such painting in the Red Parlor at the church, over the couch.

What do you picture when you think of God, or Jesus, as Shepherd? The Isaiah verses above give us a beautiful picture of someone cuddling lambs. The words of Jesus give us a picture of a shepherd finding or rescuing a lost sheep. I think it is important to also see the shepherd not in a romanticized way, but for the hard work of caring that it is. Any farmer with livestock, or youth with a 4-H project, can tell you what is required of caring for animals.

During the year that I spent in Iceland as an exchange student, I worked on a sheep farm during lambing season. Three hundred ewes. Sheep are a big deal in Iceland, outnumbering the human population and prized for their beautiful, silky wool. An older farmer/shepherd lived on and worked this farm with his daughter and her husband, and various other helpers during that busy season, including a sheepdog. They worked in shifts twenty-four hours a day, tending the births, finding lambs born in the fields, watching for lambs rejected or ewes in trouble.

It is the older shepherd that I picture when I think of what a shepherd looks like. He was not always gentle, as sheep need a firm hand. But he moved among them tirelessly to feed, help, and care for them. This included giving them their daily dose of cod liver oil, which they went crazy for!

I remember one dramatic incident in particular. Sometimes for no apparent reason a mother rejects her newborn lamb. It can be bottle fed, but will not thrive as well as being nursed. At a time when one lamb was rejected, another ewe had a stillborn lamb. The shepherd took the skin of the dead lamb and tied it with twine around the rejected lamb. The mother of the stillborn accepted it joyously to nurse as her own.

The shepherd cared for those most vulnerable and alone. THE Shepherd does the same, and asks us to be part of that everlasting task.

*Like a shepherd,
God will tend the
flock; he will
gather lambs in his
arms and lift them
onto his lap.*

*He will
gently guide the
nursing ewes.*

Isaiah 40:11

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