

What Child Is This? Shepherds – Luke 2:8-20

In 1865, an Englishman named William Chatterton Dix penned the words to a poem entitled "The Manger Throne." A few years later the first three stanzas of that poem were set to the music of an English traditional folk song called "Greensleeves" that soon became known as the beloved Christmas carol "What Child Is This?" This combination of poetry and music first was published in the United Kingdom in 1871 as a new song when it debuted in a prestigious compilation of Christmas music called Christmas Carols Old and New. For close to a century and a half the question found in the title of this carol has become an annual reminder that something significant happened on that night in Bethlehem as someone significant lay wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger. This child would change the world forever; but what child is this?

The title of the carol, "What Child Is This?", is intended to be the primary question the shepherds must have asked on the night they visited the baby Jesus. After their angelic encounter and receiving the startling news while they tended their sheep on the outskirts of Bethlehem, their heads must have been spinning rapidly. They tried to comprehend all they experienced on that first Christmas night. Our Gospel records the scene and our skit gives us the feel for what the shepherds experienced.

While no nativity scene is complete without the shepherds' presence, subsequently, the answer to this Christmas Carol's question would be incomplete without the description of what a shepherd is and what he does. What child is this? He is a shepherd; in fact, Jesus later described Himself as the good shepherd and told what a good shepherd does and who a good shepherd is in our first reading today: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." John 10:11

This is a summary statement of what this child in the manger came to be for all people. He is the one who came to lay His life down for all of humanity just as a good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. While at times the shepherds in the Christmas story have been labeled as a bit rough around the edges and living on the lowest rung of society's ladder, Jesus describes Himself as being a shepherd who has great responsibility. There is no greater responsibility than holding the life of another in the control of one's own hands. Protecting the life of others was the responsibility and calling of the shepherd.

The imagery of the shepherd is prominent in Ancient Near Eastern history. Shepherds were equated with righteous government and often appear in contexts where the subject of justice is prominent. Shepherds were expected to be the ones who showed kindness in counseling, protecting, and guiding those whom they were responsible for through every difficulty. The shepherd often times was intended to signify rulership as good, just, wise and beneficial for the people and particularly has been associated as a metaphor of kings and even deity. Even the shepherd's crook has been viewed throughout the ages as a symbol of power, authority, and strength.

Throughout the Bible, shepherds are mentioned over one hundred times. If we can understand who shepherds were in terms of how they are defined and described historically in the Bible, perhaps we can gain a better and more complete understanding of the question: What Child Is This?

Jesus speaks about having many sheep within the John 10 passage referenced earlier. "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." John 10:14-16

The owner of the flocks often was the one who also was the shepherd of his sheep such as Abel in Genesis 4 and Jacob in Genesis 30. Other times the work of a shepherd was delegated to both the daughters and sons of the owner. In Genesis 29, Laban's daughter, Rachel, is given the responsibility of shepherding her father's sheep. In fact, the first time Jacob meets Rachel, who would turn out to be the love of his life, she is working the sheep and leading them to water, just as a good shepherd would do on a daily basis.

Likewise, Jesse's son, David, was given the responsibility to take care of his father's sheep before he would be called to care for and lead the people of Israel as their king. In fact, the place David was found before he was anointed as king by the prophet Samuel was out in the fields tending his father's sheep. Even after this incredibly significant anointing of David as the future king of Israel, he continued to fulfill his duties as a shepherd while King Saul still was enthroned and leading Israel.

The child that would be born in the manger in Bethlehem would be near the pastures that David grazed his father's sheep centuries beforehand. The Savior of the world, the good shepherd, would be born in the City of David and a direct descendent of the King who also was a good shepherd in bygone days. What child is this? He is a shepherd and king just as his ancestor David.

The principal duty of the shepherd was to make sure the animals that were under his or her care had enough food and water. David's most famous poem speaks to these priorities in Psalm 23 that begins with a truth that echoes the answer to the question of the carol: What Child Is This? "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." Psalm 23:1-2

Just as the shepherd was responsible for the food and water provisions of the sheep, protecting the flock also was a priority that continually must be provided. Sheep were easy prey for wild animals as seen in various places of the Bible.

David continues in Psalm 23 to speak of the protection he felt from the Lord as his shepherd. "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." Psalm 23:4 David describes attributes of the Lord who not only provides for his nourishment, but also protects him wherever he might find himself in life. These characteristics of the good shepherd help answer the question the shepherds posed at the Nativity: What Child Is This? He is the one who will provide for and protect all who are under His care.

This good shepherd would not only protect his sheep from wild animals, but also from thieves who might try to snatch them away from their home and the life that was intended for them by the one who watched over and owned them.

The good shepherd went to great lengths to take care of those under his or her care. He would make sure they were kept intact and would go the extra mile to make sure one that was lost was looked for until it was found as Jesus taught in His parable of the lost sheep found in Matthew.

What child is this? He is the one who left all the riches and comfort of heaven to look for the ones who went astray. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one of us—to our own way. The mission of the shepherd is to look for and rescue the ones who are lost. This is what a good shepherd naturally does. This is who this child in the manger would grow to become. He is the one who came to seek and to save those who were lost, alone, exposed, and astray.

When Jesus completed the rescue mission on the cross outside of Jerusalem three decades after being born in the Bethlehem manger, and when He rose from the grave three days later, He then restored, empowered and entrusted the shepherding responsibilities to Peter on the shores of Galilee where they first met three years earlier. The whole conversation revolved around the ongoing role and responsibility of being a shepherd and training others to be shepherds of the ones Jesus came to rescue and call His own.

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." John 21:15-17

What child is this?

He is the one who came to lay down His life.

He is the one who came to provide for and protect His flock.

He is the one blessed beyond measure with ones He would call His own and who would come to know His voice.

He is the one who is the good shepherd.

His name is Jesus, the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger, just as the angel said he would be. Now go and tell everyone what has been heard, seen and experienced concerning who this child is, just as the shepherds did on that first Christmas in Bethlehem. What child is this?

He is a shepherd...the good shepherd.