

January 4, 2009
Christmas 2

"Safe in the Arms of the Shepherd"

MICAH 5:4-5

He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. ⁵ And he will be their peace.

"And he will raise you up on eagles' wings, Bear you on the breath of dawn, Make you to shine like the sun, And hold you in the palm of his hand." Why has this hymn which we just sung become one of the most popular hymns in our hymnal? Is it not because of the security and safety we have in the Lord who bears us up on eagles' wings and holds us in the palm of his hand?

Have you traveled through an airport lately? Then you know there is a certain inconvenience we pay just to be safe and secure from terrorists. The Department of Homeland Security will not let you board an airplane with more than three ounces of gel or liquid in a tube or bottle. They make you take off your shoes, pass through a screening device, and x-ray you carry on luggage. We can be so thankful there have not been any major terrorist attacks on our country or airplanes since September 11, 2001.

As Christians we know that we faced serious terrorist threats to our faith this past year, and more are on the way in the year 2009. Satan does not give up tempting us and accusing before God's throne day and night, according to Revelation 12. He is described in the Bible as a "father of lies" and a "murder from the beginning" and "roaring lion" seeking people whom he may devour. Ephesians 6 tells us, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." He is able to tempt us when we are talking on the phone, driving down the freeway, eating our meal, or even while we are worshipping here in this church.

That's the bad news facing us in 2009, but the good news is that we have Jesus protecting us as a loving shepherd protects his sheep. This morning we want to consider how we are **"Safe in the Arms of the Shepherd"** by taking a closer look at these words from the prophet Micah.

We look forward to being fed

2009 will be a great year for us when we think of how often Jesus our Shepherd will feed us this coming year, and with this feeding also strengthen us and protect us. We are told that he will "stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God." This shepherd who stands and shepherds his flock is Jesus, the child born in Bethlehem, from the tribe of Judah, whose origins were from of old from ancient times.

A faithful shepherd stands and watches over the flock that he cares for. He is not like

some hireling who sits down on the job, or takes a nap, or spends a night out partying and neglecting his duty. Jesus shepherds his flock in the strength of the Lord, because is the Lord God, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. In ancient times before the days of irrigated pastures and bales of hay, the good shepherds would always be watching their sheep to make sure they were feeding on the best grass available. He also finds refreshing water and places where the sheep can relax and digest and convert the grasses they have eaten to food that will strengthen them.

In his book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Philip Keller writes, "Green pastures are essential for success with sheep. When lambs are maturing and the ewes need green succulent feed for heavy milk flow, there is no substitute for good pasture. No sight so satisfies the sheep owner as to see his flock well and quietly fed to repletion on rich forage, able to lie down and rest, ruminate and gain." The 23rd Psalm says, "He makes me to lie down in green pastures..." Why does it say that sheep lie down in green pastures? Should it not say the sheep are led to green pastures so they can eat? When the sheep lie down, they are full, and they are converting the rich grasses into food for every cell in their body.

As we look out into a new year, we think of Jesus as our loving Shepherd taking us into his Word, opening up verses of the Bible to us, and helping us put them into our memory. We see him sending the Holy Spirit to us, helping us remember the things he has taught us in his Word. How many times did the shepherd lead you this past year into green pastures, and then lead you to sit down and carefully ruminate on the words that he gave you. We once had a prayer we used to close our worship that had these words about reading the Bible, "Grant that we might read, mark and inwardly digest them"

We can see the importance of being fed in the Word richly and daily in the words of Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." "Tho' devils all the world should fill. All eager to devour us. We tremble not, we fear no ill, they shall not over power us. This world's prince may still. Scowl fierce as he will. He can harm us none. He's judged the dead is done. One little world can fell him."

We look forward to being home

2009 will be a banner year because we also have the safety and security that comes with always being home with the Lord surrounded by his unfailing love. "And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth." The Hebrew word used here for living securely has the thought of people living in a permanent place. God's people did not have that when they wandered for 40 years in the desert. But then the Lord gave them a permanent home in the land of Canaan. They were given homes they did not build, and vineyards they did not plant, and most important they lived each day under the security of knowing they were God's chosen and special people.

There's an old saying, "Home is where the heart is." You can have the nicest house on the Central Coast, and have it furnished with the latest and best fixtures in the bathrooms, tile floors, top of the line carpet, every electronic gadget possible, and all new furniture, the best there is, but if there is no heart and no love in that house it is not a home. I read a story once of a boy who lived in very large house on an estate. He would sneak off in the summer and listen to the sounds coming from one of the workers on the estate, living in a small cottage. The kids and parents were crammed into a small house, but the sounds that

came from the house of laughter and joy and love, brought tears to the little boy, because his mom and dad were always fighting and arguing and never happy. Remember the first time you saw the movie *ET*? Were you a bit misty eyed when *ET* expressed his desire to go home with the words, "ET go home?" We all want a place where we are loved and where we enjoy that security that comes with being loved.

How could Jesus ever love a person like me? Think of how often we have wandered off in our own direction, thinking that the choices we make in life are better than the green pastures our Shepherd has for us. Isaiah 53 tells us, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way." Or the verse from the hymn that says, "Love that found me wondrous thought, Found me when I sought him not." But then we are assured by the same verse in Isaiah, "And the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Jesus took every rebellious moment in our lives upon himself, made the ransom payment for each sin, just so he bring us back to his perfect love that never changes. The 23rd Psalm reminds us that "Goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives." We find our ultimate security in that love that Jesus has which never changes. It is the perfect home, the perfect place that is always the same.

Remember the lost son. He went off and blew his inheritance in wild living. Destitute, despised, depressed and downtrodden he dragged himself home hoping to experience just a tiny morsel of his father's love that he missed so much in his life. You know the warm welcome he received when he finally came home. His father threw his arms around him and kissed him. That love of the Father is yours through Jesus your Savior. Psalm 100 says, "Know that the Lord is God. It is he who has made us, and we are his people, the sheep of his pasture." Ephesians says, that "we are no longer foreigners and strangers to God, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household." "Nothing in all creation will separate from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We look forward to living in peace

Because Jesus provides you with security by feeding you in his Word and taking you into his love, you enjoy a perfect peace in him. Our text says of Jesus our Shepherd, born in Bethlehem, and God from all eternity. "He will be their peace." Notice it does not say, "He will give us peace, or he will show us peace, or he will lead us to peace." It simply says, "He will be their peace." How many times in this coming year will your shepherd show you the nail prints in his hands that he kept after he rose from the dead, and say to you, "Peace be to you." Jesus described this peace as a peace this world cannot give. This is a peace Scripture describes as a peace that passes understanding. Romans 5 says, "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and access into the grace in which we stand." Every day, because Jesus is my peace, I can go directly to my Father in prayer without any hesitation. What peace this brings. If this is our last year on this earth we can die in peace, safe in the life Jesus lived for us and the death he died for us, having full access to our God and the place he has prepared for us.

There is only one way we can survive the year 2009 without being totally overcome by Satan's attacks. That safety and that security are found in Jesus your loving Shepherd. "He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to

the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.”