

Comfort My People

Impact Series, March 27 & 28 | John 10:11-18
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WHAT COMFORTS YOU?

If it's an emotional-support animal on an airplane, you're out of luck for now.

The federal government recently issued new guidelines eliminating emotional-support animals from commercial flights.

Emotional-support animals are animals trained to comfort people facing anxieties.

Unfortunately, lots of people suddenly developed a need to travel with help, so the number and types of emotional support animals multiplied. Of course, people wanted to take dogs and cats on planes. They also began asking for pigs, peacocks, snakes, and llamas.

That presents a problem for the airlines, because animals take up space and leave messes.

Some animals presented problems for passengers because of strange smells and sounds.

For now, if you need an emotional-support animal on a flight, your options are limited.¹

Where do you turn when you need comfort?

Do you turn to a friend for a conversation?

Do you turn to comfort foods? Personally, I like a big plate of pasta when I'm stressed.

Do you turn to exercise to regulate your emotions? Where do you turn for comfort?

As we turn to the Bible today, we find that we get great comfort in Jesus. And isn't that fantastic news? Because we all need comfort at one time or another.

JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD.

In John 10:11, we find out that *Jesus is like a shepherd.*

In John 10:11 Jesus was already talking with a crowd. He went on to say,

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

This image has two parts. The first part of the image is the sheep. Sheep were an important part of the ancient economy. At the same time, sheep are not considered to be bright.²

Simply put, sheep need a shepherd, particularly in Palestine. Palestine was and is a comparatively dry climate. Consequently, sheep (and other livestock) have to roam widely to find adequate food and water. It is the shepherd's job to find food and water and keep sheep safe from predators.

Shepherding became an image used broadly to describe leadership. Leaders were like shepherds guiding, protecting, and caring for their people.

Psalm 23 verses 1-4 remind us that Israel looked at God as their shepherd. Psalm 23:1-4 reads:

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/08/944128033/no-more-emotional-support-peacocks-as-feds-crack-down-on-service-animals-on-plan>

² Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1985). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (p. 936). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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.

Those verses say that God the Shepherd provides for his people, leads us, strengthens us, keeps us safe, and comforts us.

Jesus said in John 10:11,

"I am like a shepherd to my people."

Then, in John 10:12-13 we are reminded that Jesus is a Good Shepherd.

"He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep."

Fundamentally, shepherds were responsible for keeping sheep safe.

The Bible recounts multiple dangers that sheep faced, including dangerous weather and dangerous animals, such as, wolves and lions.

In fact, the equipment a shepherd had was largely for protection. Shepherds had cloaks to keep themselves safe from the weather. They also had a staff to help them guide sheep plus navigate rough terrain. They had rods to use in combat with predators. King David, when he was a young shepherd, spoke about keeping a sling and rocks handy to fight animals.³

However, not all shepherds were the same. Jesus knew that hired shepherds, who stood in for owners, were not always diligent or even ethical. Hired shepherds would quickly give up and run away when dangers threatened their sheep. Worse, hired shepherds at times were known to steal animals themselves.

Here Jesus is claiming that he is not like the hired shepherds. Instead, he is the Good Shepherd, the one to whom the sheep belong and who care for his sheep.

Next, in John 10:14-15 Jesus tells us that The Good Shepherd knows his people.

"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."

Jesus starts with his relationship with his Heavenly Father. Jesus knows his Father, and his Father knows him.

Jesus' relationship with the Father is the model for his relationship with his people.

Just as Jesus knows the Father and the Father knows him, Jesus knows his followers (everything about us), and we know Jesus. He has revealed his true self to us.

In John 10:16 Jesus adds that The Good Shepherd is still gathering his people.

"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."

³ Montonini, M. (2016). [Shepherd](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

Clearly, as the people of Israel thought of themselves as sheep belonging to God, their shepherd, they conceived of themselves as one people, one nation, and one sheepfold. They also thought of themselves as THE sheepfold, the only people on earth truly belonging to God.

Jesus was saying that he has sheep or followers that are in other sheepfolds or people groups. They belong to him as well; they want to know Jesus, and they will respond to him. Jesus wants to gather them.

Jesus says that when he gathers people from every nation, tribe, and people group, he will make us all into one flock together: Israelite and Gentile.

The Good Shepherd is still gathering his people.

In John 10:17-18 Jesus concludes that *The Good Shepherd will lay down his life for his people.*

"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."

When Jesus talked about laying down his life for his people, he was referring directly to going to the cross. He would die to pay the price for us so that we might live.

Jesus wanted us to understand that his Father sent him into the world for this purpose.

Even though God the Father sent Jesus the Son into the world, dying on the cross was still his choice. Philippians 2:8 reminds us of that fact:

And being found in human form, he [Jesus] humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus came, went to the cross, and died for his people of his own choice. In John 14:30-31 Jesus made it clear that Satan didn't overcome him or force his hand:

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father...

And Jesus, who willingly laid down his life for his people, had the authority to take it up again when he was resurrected. Jesus did all of that because of his care for us.

What does the care of the Good Shepherd look like in everyday life? We see it when Jesus rode into Jerusalem triumphantly on Palm Sunday.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD WANTED TO COMFORT JERUSALEM.

On Palm Sunday we remember the day when Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem.

In Luke 19:28-40 Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.

As he neared the city, he passed by the villages of Bethphage and Bethany, just over the Mount of Olives from the city.

Jesus sent two of his disciples into one of the villages to find a young donkey that had not yet been ridden. They came back with the perfect colt, placed their cloaks on its back, and put Jesus onto the colt.

As Jesus rode along toward Jerusalem, a crowd began to gather. Disciples spread their cloaks on the road. People spread branches from nearby palm trees to line the way for Jesus to ride.

People began to get excited. They rejoiced and cried out to Jesus and praised God.

They said, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd were scandalized at this behavior and told Jesus to rebuke his disciples. Jesus told them that if the crowds were silent, the rocks themselves would cry out.

Then, as he approached Jerusalem, Jesus wept over the city in Luke 19:41-44.

Jesus said that he wished desperately that Jerusalem's people would recognize the moment that was at hand in his approach and coming death.

The people of Jerusalem had an opportunity to experience true peace! However, their eyes were closed such that they could not see; these important things were actually hidden from them.

It wasn't the first time Jesus expressed such a sentiment. In Luke 13:34 Jesus lamented again,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

There is tough love in there!

They had turned down the Kingdom of God so many times that now it was hidden from them.

Consequently, they missed the hour of their "visitation." The word used for "visitation" implies oversight. God had come to them in Jesus to inspect them. Had he found them faithful, then he would have rewarded them. However, since he found them faithless, they missed their opportunity and would instead experience the consequences of their actions.

Jesus promised them difficult days ahead. He promised that barricades would surround Jerusalem and leave no way out. It sounds very much like the siege of Jerusalem laid by the Romans a few decades later. Jesus promised that in this coming siege, the conquerors would win and tear Jerusalem to the ground.

Because they rejected Jesus and his comfort, it was time for tough love.

However, longing to comfort his people is nothing new.

We find God longing to comfort his people over and over again.

In Isaiah 40:1-2 on another occasion when his people rejected him and experienced the consequences, God said to the people,

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

What tender words! God, always the Good Shepherd, would gather his people. Then in Isaiah 40:11 God promised that—like a shepherd—he would gather his lambs and care for them:

He [the LORD] will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

Comforting his people is in the Good Shepherd's nature. It's what he did for Jerusalem, and it's what he does for us.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD COMFORTS US.

The Good Shepherd comforted me when I cut my Achilles tendon.

The picture you see is from 2014. Friends are carrying me across the Mississippi River. Of course, that's right at the headwaters, so the river is only about 15 feet wide at that point.

They were carrying me because I couldn't walk on my left leg. I had sliced most of the way through my Achilles tendon earlier that summer.

After the accident, I spent weeks in a boot. On my first visit to a physical therapist, my first exercise was pointing my toe and then relaxing. That was where my recovery started.

The day when it all happened was an interesting day. My wife and I woke early that morning since she was due at the hospital in town for a small surgical procedure. When we woke, it was raining, and the alarm was blaring in our basement due to the fact that our sump pump had stopped working and our basement was flooded. We got the sump pump working, cleared out some furniture to save it from the water, and headed to the hospital.

That evening, after getting Tammi home and realizing that we would not be able to clean out enough water to save the carpet, I was cutting up the carpet in our basement and removing it when I backed into a knife and sliced my tendon. I ended up at the hospital in the same bed my wife had been in earlier that morning when they prepped her for her procedure.

That accident came after a long year. The previous spring, my wife had a heart attack. That fall I had cancer surgery. Then I spent the spring and summer in a boot.

In some ways, I was at a low place when my friends carried me across the Mississippi River.

The interesting thing is that while there were low points that year, Jesus really was my Good Shepherd, and he really did comfort me. God was so faithful to me during those days!

The Good Shepherd comforts us by inviting us to know him.

Back in John chapter 10, Jesus said that his own know him, and he knows them.

The word Jesus uses there is deep and important. Of course, it means to learn or understand.

However, there's so much more to it. It implies that we discover one another, that hidden things about ourselves are revealed and we are transparent.

When Jesus uses this word in the Gospel according to John, it means that he is inviting us into a full covenant relationship with him.

That's real comfort. We get to know Jesus.

The Good Shepherd comforts us by offering us life.

Just before what we read today, in John 10:10, Jesus said that he came so we might have life.

Then in these verses, Jesus said that he was laying down his life to pay the price for our sin so that we might get life.

When Jesus speaks about life here, he is not simply saying that he came so that we might keep on breathing air and taking up space. He means that we get new life after we are forgiven, abundant life as we are filled with new purpose, and eternal life.

That's real comfort. We get life.

The Good Shepherd comforts us by giving us the Holy Spirit.

In John 14:16 after Jesus surprised his disciples by telling them that he really would be leaving them shortly, he gave them good news. He said that after he left,

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever ...”

The word translated as “Helper” means that the Holy Spirit is the one who practically comes alongside us in life. He makes the life of God real to us. The Holy Spirit causes us to feel the comfort that comes from God.

The Good Shepherd comforts us as we engage in a broad array of spiritual disciplines.

When we read our Bibles, we see the power of God, how sufficient he is for anything that we face, and the way that he provides directly for us. That’s comforting.

When we pray, we tell God what’s happening with us and call on his power. As we listen, we feel his life and encouragement and even challenge pouring into us.

When we worship, we are comforted.

When we gather with other followers of Jesus, we’re comforted.

When we serve and see what God can do through us, we’re comforted.

The Good Shepherd comforts us. But that’s not the end...

THE GOOD SHEPHERD COMFORTS OTHERS THROUGH US.

The Good Shepherd is using Caleb Smith to comfort people.

As a child, Caleb found a passion for rescuing rabbits, particularly rare breeds of rabbits.

He actually started a rescue home for rabbits.

His rescue mission led him to using rabbits as emotional support animals.

He takes rabbits to nursing homes, schools, and anyplace people need comfort and love.

He takes his animals to funerals; he stands outside the service, and family members can pet and play with the animals while they wait to go inside for the service.

Caleb was even invited to take his bunnies to help students traumatized by school shootings.

During the pandemic, Caleb has continued his work. He takes his bunnies to make visits at the windows of nursing homes, he brings bunnies to schools to comfort teachers stressed out by the pandemic, and he even does Zoom events for businesses. Just watching the bunnies calms down stressed-out workers.

By age 14, Caleb had raised enough money to create a rabbit sanctuary on five islands in the Mississippi River. The largest of them, 22 acres in area, is called “Peacebunny Island.” Caleb has raised enough money to buy the islands, a headquarters, and a houseboat to facilitate his work.⁴

If the Good Shepherd can use a teenager like Caleb to comfort so many people, don’t you think he can use us to comfort some people in his name? Here are three simple keys to comforting others:

Key #1 to Comforting Others: Listen actively.

When people are hurting, they need to tell their story. They need to talk.

It’s tough to be a good listener, though. Many of us are wired to insert our opinions and try to help. We have to fight that urge.

⁴ <https://people.com/pets/teen-trains-rabbits-therapy-animals-at-peacebunny-island-sanctuary/>

Instead, the most helpful thing is to listen actively; that means paying careful attention what another person is saying (which is a big gift to give) and reflecting what we're hearing.

If someone says, "I'm hurting," then you say, "What I hear you saying is that you are in pain." It sounds simple, but it is difficult, and it lets the other person know that they are really being heard. That's key #1 to comforting people.

Key #2 to Comforting Others: Take time.

We are very busy people. We are constantly on the move.

When we seek to comfort someone, it's important to restrain our urge to move on.

When we ask someone how they're doing, then we take the time to stop and really listen.

Jesus said that he was going to lay down his life for his people. In our world, part of laying down our lives for others means taking time with them.

Key #3 to Comforting Others: Offer to pray.

It's important for us to bring God into the conversation.

I know this can be intimidating if you don't feel comfortable praying out loud. You're worried that you'll mess up.

Plus, it can seem awkward if the other person isn't an active follower of Jesus.

However, when people are hurting, they are longing for help and comfort. It is so comforting to know that someone else is petitioning God on their behalf.

Simply say to God, "God, this is my friend. You love my friend. Please comfort my friend." That's a very simple prayer, and you can pray it in Jesus' name.

When you do, you introduce the Good Shepherd to the conversation, and what they really need is Jesus.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

The comfort we've received is the exact comfort that others are longing for.

And that is one important way you and I can have IMPACT in our world for Jesus.