

The LORD is My Shepherd

14th Sun. after Pent. – 09/14/25 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Ezekiel 34:11-24 Pastor Keith Besel

v.23-24, [The “Lord Yahweh” says,] **“And I will set up over them one shepherd, My servant David, and He shall feed them: He shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, Yahweh, will be their God, and My servant David shall be prince among them. I am Yahweh; I have spoken.”**

Introduction

- ✘ We all acknowledge that we live in a different time; a different, more modern society than the time Ezekiel and the Israelites lived here in this Old Testament Reading before us today. Many would say that we have “moved on”; progressed beyond such quaint things as shepherds, sheep, shepherd’s crooks, grazing lands, and other concepts that were the currency and basis for survival in the past.
 - ➔ Of course, there are still parts of the world where shepherding sheep and caring for them are big business and still constitute a mainstay for an entire way of life.
 - ➔ And at the time of both the Old and New Testament things were very much agriculturally and livestock-based in nature. We see that not only in this text as well as our Gospel Reading, but also reflected in the Collect of the Day that we prayed earlier, and most of the hymns that we are singing this morning.
- ✘ So, if we are Christians (which we are!), it is important for us not only to be open to the truths that God’s Word is teaching us about the shepherd-sheep relationship, but it is our obligation; our duty as God’s people to put the effort in, to actually understand all of the ways that this shepherd-sheep relationship is still relevant to us as we grow with Jesus today and every day moving forward in our faith. Because, look brothers and sisters, a Christian who is not growing in your relationship to the Shepherd is a person who has been scattered from the flock; who is at grave risk of being devoured by Satan, the “roaring lion” that 1 Peter warns us against.
 - ➔ In fact, Jesus is revealed in today’s Gospel Reading as the Good Shepherd; the One who leaves the 99 sheep in open country to seek out and save the one lost sheep, whom He puts joyfully on His shoulders and then throws the sort of party for friends and neighbors that could make one think of the Lord’s Supper.
- ✘ But I’m getting ahead of myself. I’m supposed to be preaching on the Old Testament Reading right now, which, though related to the picture Jesus uncovers in the Gospel, actually addresses the shepherd-sheep topic differently – though no less important for us. Yahweh Himself; the one true God who is, was and always will be our God and Savior makes it crystal clear here in Ezekiel, chapter 34 that He and only He is my Shepherd.
 - ➔ In order for us to have the best chance of hearing and embracing His message to us today, we need to look at this text from two different perspectives. First, how the Lord is my Shepherd then and there – at the time of Ezekiel and Israel, and second, how the Lord is my Shepherd here and now today.

I. Then and There – at the time of Ezekiel

- ✘ As I said before, for most of us, this modern society in which we live has moved on from most of the images and illustrations that God used with His people in Ezekiel 34. I mean, it was just barely past 600 BC, some 2,500 years ago. And we just don’t live and think and speak as they did in those ancient times – of shepherds, sheep, grazing lands, and all the rest.

- ➔ But just because that ancient society had a much greater understanding of those pastoral, agrarian, and rural realities than us, they still were just as capable of using that language and those concepts figuratively – not just literally, as we might be tempted to believe. It is absolutely wrong to think that just because their society was not as “developed” as ours, that they were somehow less intelligent or perceptive than us. In fact, in some ways they were much more intelligent and perceptive than us.
- ✘ So, for Ezekiel and the people of the near East, the role of a shepherd was easily understood as a metaphor for the great king – or perhaps a pagan god.
- ➔ The evidence for this figurative use is before us today in verse 15 where God – the King of kings, likens Himself to a “shepherd of [His] sheep”, who “goes in search” for those who have been scattered. That means, of course, that this word “sheep” serves as the metaphor for God’s people – Israelites then and there with Ezekiel, and Christians now today.
- ➔ Likewise, the metaphors are compounded as the Shepherd “feeds” them, “leads” them into “pleasant pasture,” “binds up” the injured, and “strengthens” the weak. All of this is picture-language for the way that the Lord Yahweh, in the person of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, deals with us, the sheep. That is to say, that the prophet Ezekiel – under the Holy Spirit’s inspiration – intended for his words to be interpreted figuratively; as a parable, that is an earthly story with a much deeper, heavenly meaning.
- ✘ Sure, that language of shepherd and sheep started and became well known to the Israelites there in the 6th century BC; but God had every intention that those words would point beyond their time and place to much greater realities; realities, in fact, that remain just as poignant and meaningful to us, all these centuries later.
- ✘ Take that passage that I read at the beginning of this message in verses 23-24: “And I will set up over them one shepherd, My servant David, and He shall feed them: He shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, Yahweh, will be their God, and My servant David shall be prince among them. I am Yahweh; I have spoken.”
- ➔ To speak of Yahweh’s “servant David,” was to look back 500 years to king David who, in Ezekiel’s time, was already a part of their history. But at the same time it referred to the past, it was pointing those people forward in time, to the promised Messiah; David’s greater Son, Jesus!
- ➔ But the passage makes an important distinction between the speaker (who is Lord Yahweh) and this promised David when it says, “My servant David.” We know from Matthew 1:6-16 in Jesus’ lineage that He came from the house (or lineage) of David. So Ezekiel’s prophecy is already calling us to ponder that unique and impossible relationship for us to fully grasp, between God the Father and Christ the Son; co-equal in the Holy Trinity with the Spirit, but distinguishable as the Father and His only begotten Son from eternity.
- ➔ Still today we confess every Sunday these realities that Scripture teaches us when we confess our faith through the Church’s creeds. But a foretaste of all this abundance is revealed by the prophet Ezekiel five centuries before our Lord Jesus was born in the flesh.
- ✘ In Ezekiel’s day, the “sheep” in our text – the Israelites – had been scattered throughout the ancient Near East since August of 586 BC, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. So here Ezekiel points those people to the day when Yahweh will search out His “sheep” (that is, the scattered remnant of Israel) and will restore them to lush pastures atop the mountains of Israel, as we see in verse 13. It’s then and there that God’s sheep will be well-led, well-provisioned, well-watered – and that Yahweh Himself will take care of everything. He truly is their “Shepherd.”

➔ But we have the curious detail in verse 17 about the Lord Yahweh “judging” between “sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats.” The strong sheep have hogged the best fodder and muddied the clear streams. So, Yahweh takes the side of His oppressed sheep and says that He will not, and cannot, be intimidated by the fat sheep’s head-butting and the way they thrust the weak away with their horns.

➔ Again, Ezekiel uses this picture language to describe those people and organizations at that time in Israel – the religious and political leaders – who were undercutting His ministry; mixing false teaching in with the pure springs of God’s Word, and scattering the already widely scattered sheep even further. But God promises to establish “one” Shepherd who will unite them all; the shoot of David – our Lord Jesus, who alone will feed them and be their Shepherd.

II. Here and Now in Our Time

✕ That moves the text 500 years closer to our time today when Jesus came as the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s agrarian prophecy. In every one of His healing miracles, we see Jesus “binding up the injured” and “strengthening the weak,” just as Ezekiel had prophesied. As Jesus taught the people during the three years of His earthly ministry, He interpreted God’s Holy Word as it pointed the light of God’s truth upon His own death and resurrection; toward His gifts of repentance and forgiveness for all sinners.

➔ Yes, it’s there in Jesus, that we see the Triune God “feeding [His sheep] with good pasture” and “making them to lie down” beside the still waters that we all know well in Psalm 23.

➔ The Gospels recount for us Jesus’ hostile encounters, over and again, against the self-righteous Scribes and Pharisees and we see Him warding off the “fat and sleek” sheep who trample down the good pasture of God’s truth; who contaminate His clear streams of living water. Even the image of the divine Shepherd’s “judging” shows up in Matthew 25:32, where Jesus tells us that the nations will be separated “as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” when the Son of Man appears at the end of the age. Yes, Jesus identifies Himself so closely with the sheep that He became one of them, dying in our place: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ... ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God” (Jn. 1:29, 33–34).

✕ Yes, all of Ezekiel’s prophecy finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, 100% man and 100% God.

➔ In fact, my fellow sheep, they are still fulfilled today. Guess where? It may be the last place you’d expect to find it, but Scripture says that it is so. Today the work prophesied by Ezekiel, and fulfilled by Jesus, is carried on here and now through God’s public office of the holy ministry – though I admit that my own ministry in that office so often falls very short.

➔ Nevertheless, this is the truth that God tells us in His Holy Word. In today’s Epistle Reading, 1 Timothy 1:16, St. Paul presents himself as someone who, in spite of his place as the “chief of sinners”, Jesus granted him “mercy for this reason” so that he might serve as “an example to those who were to believe in [Jesus] for eternal life.” Right now today, every faithful pastor in Christ’s Church – including the one standing before you this very moment, “has received (Christ’s) mercy” and forgiveness and power to be “an example” of how truly powerful God’s grace is to you sinners who also “believe in [Jesus] for eternal life.”

➔ You see what my role is before you today? To stand up here, as an undeserving and sin-filled soul; in this holy pulpit within God’s Holy Church as Christ’s under-shepherd and to boldly proclaim, “If Jesus, the Good Shepherd, can find, bring back from behind the gates of hell, and feed and heal and forgive the likes of me, then my fellow sheep, He can, and has done it with you as well.”

- ✘ Yes, according to Ezekiel's prophecy – you are the “sheep.” That's not a derogatory thing to say, it's just how it is in God's holy truth. We Christians are immeasurably blessed to be the “sheep” in the shepherd-sheep relationship, because we desperately need to follow a voice. And Jesus says in John 10:27, “My sheep hear My voice and I know them, and they follow Me.”
 - ➔ Where again do we do that? In the preaching office; in the place where Jesus' voice is heard in this specific locality; from His pulpit where His Gospel is proclaimed; in the Holy Absolution where His forgiveness is declared; at the baptismal font where His grace cleanses and adopts His sheep; and at the altar from which His body and blood is administered and fed to you, His beloved sheep. These are the places where the Good Shepherd has promised that you will hear His voice.
 - ➔ And as His under-shepherd, I am humbled and blessed to share in the Master's ministry and the care of His flock, also teaching, comforting, praying for, and healing the weak; the hurting and the grief-stricken sheep in Christ's stead. Believe me, I know it's a tall order, and often I do not measure up. But because you call me “pastor”, which comes from the German word for “shepherd,” I promise that I will seek with Christ's power to do my best to lead and serve you, His beloved sheep, in His name for as long as it is His desire and will.
- ✘ So the “Lord is my/your Shepherd,” not only then and there – during the time of Ezekiel, and in the fulfillment of Jesus Christ our Lord, but yes, the “Lord is my/your Shepherd” here and now – in His prophetic and apostolic ministry to which you called me to be your pastor. I need your prayers, just as much as you need mine; just as much as we all need and have our Lord Jesus ... as our Shepherd and our Savior, forever! Amen.