

“The True Shepherd”

Ezekiel 34:11-24

September 15, 2013

17th Sunday After Pentecost

Although I have to admit I don't know much about sheep or shepherding (even though the Bible talks a lot about these topics), I can imagine two things that can go wrong in this enterprise. First, sheep can wander away from the flock and shepherd and get into a lot of trouble – even die. That's the most obvious one we think of when we consider the topic. Secondly, shepherds can fail to adequately shepherd the flocks and thus being a party to the trouble the sheep get into – either by directly causing the trouble or failing to prevent the trouble. And there can be a time when both of these things happen as is the case today in our text from the prophet Ezekiel.

The sheep (the people of God in this case) have been scattered. They have wandered away from the Lord. They have done the evil which God forbid. They failed to do the good which God commanded and show mercy and justice. They refused to hear the Word of the Lord and repent, choosing instead to pay attention to false shepherds and worship false gods. The Lord God was furious and punished them severely. As our text says, “They have been scatted on a day of clouds and thick darkness”. The people were taken captive and carried off in exile to Babylon. Jerusalem was destroyed with clouds of thick darkness rising from it as she burned.

The shepherds (the prophets, priests, and kings) were not without blame in what happened to the sheep. They had not done their job as leaders in leading and caring for the sheep. The Lord is explicit in His anger towards them in the verses previous to our text. The Lord says to them,

“Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.”
(Ezekiel 34:2-4)

The leaders were exploiting the people and profiting off of them. They were not feeding them with the Word of God but were leading them in the worship of idols. They were not caring for the hurt or

seeking after the lost. They were living for themselves. They were not doing their job. So, as the Lord was angry with the people for their sin, He was equally angry with those whom He had sent to serve the sheep - who should have known better and done more.

The Lord God proposed a radical solution to the problem of both the sinful sheep and the sinful shepherds. The Lord God would do the job Himself. He says, “Behold, I myself will search for my sheep....I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scatted....I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. I will feed them....I myself will be the shepherd of the sheep...I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak. I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey.”

The Lord did rescue His people from exile in Babylon. He brought them back and led them to the Promised Land. He fed them, cared for them, bound up their injuries, strengthened them, and restored them. He worked through faithful human leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah with their preaching and teaching, but, make no mistake about it, the Lord doing the work.

These words have application to us in our day and beyond. The people of God today are still like sheep – and that’s not a compliment. Isaiah says, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way” (Is. 53:6). We have wandered away from the will of the Lord and have gone our own way. We have done the evil which God forbids. We’ve made excuses for it, denying that what we have done is evil or saying that times have changed and God needs to “get with it.” We have not done all the good which God commands. We have not always showed mercy for our neighbor in need. We have not fought for justice. And often times we just haven’t cared. We have often refused to hear the Word of the Lord and repent. Instead, we pay attention to the false gods of our age – wealth, pleasure, self-interest, and so on. On our own, in our sinful nature, we are exiled from God.

Like for His people of old, God has sent shepherds – pastors (which means “shepherd), elders, and church leaders – to care for His sheep. We who are shepherds today fail as shepherds did of old. We fail to seek out the lost sheep, either those who have never been part of the flock or those who have wandered away from the flock. We watch them go and hope they will come back. We can get so busy with “church stuff” that we may fail to care for the flock. We may fail at feeding the flock. Instead of the good pasture and the clear water of God’s Word, there is always the temptation to allow philosophies, religious ideas, and doctrines that are impure and potentially dangerous to the soul simply because those ideas and teachings are popular. We hope that more people will like us when we go along with the crowd.

The Lord is certainly angry when His people sin, wander away, and get into spiritual danger. But the Lord is also angry when the shepherds don’t do what they are supposed to do in preventing these things and caring for the sheep. Neither the sheep nor the shepherds can make up for their sin. So the Lord provides a radical solution which is prophesied in our text for today.

The Lord says through Ezekiel, “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, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.” (Ez. 34:23-24) The Lord, who said He Himself would be the shepherd of His sheep, prophesies of one shepherd – His servant David. What are we to make of this? King David had been dead for several centuries. This is a prophecy of the Messiah – the one Shepherd who would be both Lord and from the line of David at the same time. This is Jesus who would be the one shepherd who would do the job Himself.

Jesus came, not to hobnob with the wealthy or hang around with the righteous. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. While on this earth, Jesus moved from village to village and city to city, seeking first the lost sheep of Israel and then expanding the scope of his search to sheep that were never in His flock. He spoke the Word of God which called people to repentance. He wasn’t a passive shepherd who was soft on sin. But He also wasn’t harsh and judgmental like some of the

shepherds whom He had sent had been. He spoke the Word of God which proclaimed forgiveness of sin and restoration to the people of God.

But Jesus did more than speak forgiveness. He earned forgiveness. Jesus came, not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. His life was the price which earned the forgiveness, not only for wandering sheep, but also for failed shepherds. By His crucifixion on the cross, Jesus has forgiven you. He has also forgiven me. He has searched for us and found us. He has brought us back from all the places we have been scattered and brought us to the flock and restored us.

Jesus has risen from the dead and lives to be our shepherd today. We do not need to be afraid. We do not have to be lonely. We do not have to believe the lies of this world and settle for spiritual junk food which either does not help us or can actually harm us. Jesus is our living Shepherd who feeds us with the good pasture of His Word which shows us God's truth and nourishes us with God's love. When we are injured with sin and guilt, Jesus binds us up with the good and joyful news of the forgiveness of sins. When we are weak in our faith and trust, Jesus strengthens us by giving us Himself – His own body to eat and His own blood to drink.

He does all of this, not directly, but indirectly through the human undershepherds which He has called and sent to His flock. He does this through the preaching, teaching, baptizing and administering of the Lord's Supper by these undershepherds. It may be their voices you hear and their hands which you see, but it is the Lord doing the work.

These undershepherds may not seem like anything special. They may seem to be weak and sinful like the sheep. And we are. I and other pastors and leaders in the church are only forgiven sheep called and sent to serve their fellow sheep. I will likely fail again as will you, the sheep. But shepherds and sheep both live in God's forgiveness. The shepherds are able to search for sheep, gather sheep, forgive sheep, feed sheep with God's Word, care for sheep, and strengthen sheep, not by their own power and authority, but only through the power and authority given them by the Good

Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Through them, Christ seeks, Christ finds, Christ gathers, Christ forgives, Christ feeds, Christ cares, and Christ strengthens.

Sinful sheep and failing shepherds - we all live in Christ's forgiveness. We all live by Christ's Word. We all live under His care and by His strength. Sheep are called to live by faith. Shepherds are called to live and serve faithfully. It is only by Jesus that any of us are able to do that. It is Jesus Christ who lives among us, in us, and through us. We are all His flock and He alone is the one true Shepherd. He daily forgives us and fully restores us. He leads us day by day through the valley of the shadow of death in this life and He will bring us all through death to life in our Promised Land of heaven one day. May that give us comfort in conflict, hope in life, and assurance in death. Amen.