

Sermon Draft

Text: Ezekiel 34:11–24

Sermon: “Our Shepherd”

*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.*

(Ezekiel 34:23–24)

Modern society has moved on and such quaint things as shepherds, sheep, shepherd’s crooks, grazing lands, and other concepts do not hold as much currency for us as they once did. Of course, there are many parts of the world where shepherding sheep and caring for them remain big business and constitute a kind of mainstay for an entire way of life. It’s certainly not that way for us, however it was most definitely that way back in the olden days of the Bible such as we see reflected in the Old Testament and Gospel lessons, the final verse of today’s Psalm, the Collect of the Day, and in two of our hymns this morning.

So Christians, need to be open to what the Scriptures say about the shepherd-sheep relationship and remain open to all the ways this relationship remains pertinent in our growing with Jesus not just during the Pentecost season but each and every day.

In our Gospel this morning Jesus is revealed as the Good Shepherd, who leaves the ninety-nine sheep in open country to seek out and save the one lost sheep, whom he puts joyfully on his shoulders, then throws the sort of party for friends and neighbors that could make one think of the Lord's Supper.

I'm preaching on the Old Testament Reading this morning, which, though related to the picture of Jesus revealed in the Holy Gospel, develops the shepherd-sheep theme differently though no less important for us.

To be sure, modern society has moved on, and we simply do not have the same understanding nowadays as in the ancient times of shepherds, sheep, grazing lands, and all the rest.

However, it needs to be said that while ancient society had a much greater understanding of pastoral, agricultural, and rural realities than we do, still the ancients were capable of using this language and these concepts figuratively and not just literally. So, in the ancient Near East of which Ezekiel was part, the shepherd was a kind of metaphor for the great king.

We see evidences of this figurative use in today's Old Testament Reading, where God likens himself to a "shepherd of [his] sheep" (v 15), who "*goes in search*" for the latter. Of course, "sheep" is another metaphor for people Israelites in the original situation, and Christians now. Likewise, the shepherd "feeds" them and "leads" them into "pleasant pasture," he "binds up" the injured, and "strengthens" the weak. This is all picture-language for the way that the God, in the person of the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, deals with us.

Take the passage with which I began today's sermon: ***“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”*** (vs 23–24). Then the prophecy looks ahead to Jesus: great David's greater son! But the passage distinguishes between the speaker (who is Lord Yahweh) and Yahweh's “servant” David. We should ponder the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ was of the house and lineage of David. So, what is expressed already in Ezekiel's prophecy is the unique relationship that even now exists, always has, and always will exist between God the Father and Christ the Son. These realities, portrayed most completely in John's Gospel, are confessed still today in the Church's creeds. But a foretaste of all this abundance is revealed by the prophet Ezekiel centuries before our Lord Jesus Christ was born in the flesh.

In Ezekiel's day, the Israelites, the "sheep" had been scattered throughout the ancient Near East since August 586, when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Our prophecy, then, looks to the day when Yahweh will search out his "sheep" (that is, the scattered remnant of Israel) and restore them to lush pastures atop the mountains of Israel. Hence, the sheep will be well-led, well-provisioned, well-watered and Yahweh will take care of everything. He is the "Shepherd."

Then there is the curious detail about the Lord Yahweh "judging" between "sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats" (v 17). The strong sheep have hogged the best fodder and sullied the streams. Yahweh takes the oppressed sheep's part. He will not be intimidated by the fat sheep's head-butting and thrusting the weak away by means of their horns.

Again, Ezekiel uses picture language to depict those interests in contemporary Israel who were thwarting his ministry, mixing false teaching in with the pure springs of God's Word, and scattering the already widely scattered sheep still further. But the prophecy looks to the establishment of the "one" shepherd who will unite them all. The offshoot and heir of David, our Lord Jesus Christ shall feed them and be their shepherd.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is of course the fulfillment of Ezekiel's agrarian prophecy. In his every healing miracle, Jesus was ***"binding up the injured"*** and ***"strengthening the weak,"*** as Ezekiel had prophesied. In his teaching ministry, his reinterpreting of the Scripture in light of his own death and resurrection, in his forgiveness of repentant sinners' sins, Jesus was "feeding them with good pasture" and "making them to lie down" beside the still waters, to cite Psalm 23.

In his every hostile encounter against the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees, Jesus was warding off the “fat and sleek” sheep who trample down the good pasture and sully the streams. Even the image of the divine Shepherd’s “judging” gets into the picture.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells of the separation of the nations “*as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats*” when the Son of Man appears at the end of the age. Indeed, Jesus identifies himself so closely with the sheep that he became one of them, dying in their 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*” (John 1:29, 33–34).

So, all the words of Ezekiel’s prophecy were fulfilled in Jesus. In fact, they still are fulfilled. Now the work prophesied by Ezekiel, fulfilled by Jesus, is carried on here and now through the office of the holy ministry.

I admit that my own ministry often falls quite short. Nevertheless, this is the truth according to the Scriptures. In today's Epistle, Paul presents himself as someone who was pitied by Christ Jesus to be an ***“example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life”*** (1 Timothy 1:16). Every pastor has been “pitied” to be such an “example.” Including me.

According to Ezekiel's prophecy and many places in Scripture we are the “sheep.” Christians take the part of “sheep” in the shepherd-sheep relationship and need to follow a voice. ***“My sheep hear my voice,” Jesus says, “and I know them, and they follow me”*** (John 10:27). In the preaching office, where the Lord Jesus Christ resounds in this specific locality, from the pulpit. In the preaching of the Gospel, in the Holy Absolution, the Good Shepherd's voice is heard. I am his under-shepherd and so share in the Master's ministry of baptizing, teaching, comforting, praying for, and healing the weak sheep in Christ's stead. It's a tall order, and I often don't measure up.

But “pastor” means “shepherd,” after all. Jesus’ voice continues to resound in this congregation, sometimes referred to as a “flock.”

So, the “Lord Is My Shepherd,” not only then and there during the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel, in the fulfillment of Jesus Christ our Lord. But also, the “Lord Is My Shepherd” here and now in my prophetic and apostolic ministry for which you called me to be your pastor. I know I cannot measure up, under-shepherd that I am. And so, I desire your prayers.

“And now the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Amen