

THE GOOD SHEPHERD SEARCHES FOR HIS SHEEP

Christ is Risen!

Hear again the Word of God for this “Good Shepherd Sunday” which lies within the season of the Resurrection of our Lord:

“As a shepherd seeks his flock in (the) day he is among his sheep being scattered, thus I will seek out My sheep; and I will cause to rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered in (a) day of clouds and darkness.”¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

From the comforting words of the 23rd Psalm, to the consistently cited witness of the first order of Peter’s first letter, God, as He has for well over five centuries on this third Sunday of Easter, God has declared His image of Himself as the Good/Beautiful Shepherd. He has proclaimed that it is nature to seek out and care for those who have wandered or become lost from His sheepfold. He has announced that it His will to tend and nurture His own – those who hear His Voice and heed His call to follow Him into death and life. He has taught that He dwells among His sheep, to guide them, guard, them, and protect them.

In addition, from the inspired hand of Ezekiel writing in the sixth century BC, to St. John’s hand guided by the Spirit of the Living God near the end of the first century AD, for centuries on this particular Sunday of the Church Year, God has declared the members of His flock to be sheep. That image is not a complement to our natures. From those who have kept sheep, there comes a knowledge that whatever the lead sheep does as it is being led, so follows the rest in the flock, all the way to the last one. Outside the

¹ *Isaiah 34:12.*

times of “follow-the – leader” individual sheep have been known to wander from the fold. That God views His people as sheep means that He knows our inclination to drift, or even run, into sin. He fully grasps the reality that each of us – not just teenagers following the crowd – desires at some time or another to follow whatever creature may be leading us, even if that may be a “Judas Goat” who leads us to slaughter. That means that, when seen as sheep, God’s people will have times when we, either individually or collectively, become lost. To those realities, God declares:

For thus says Adonai YHWH (The LORD, I AM), “Behold, I then will search for My sheep and I will seek them out.”²

There is so much in Good Shepherd Sunday’s texts to consider, for our lives in sin and in Christ, that to proclaim all their mysteries would take hours, if not days. That is one reason why the four primary readings come into the ears of God’s people every year. Their words are declared as a third week begins, after the Passion, Death, Resurrection, and appearances of our Lord have shown the price the Good Shepherd paid for His wandering, dirty, clueless sheep. From the Holy Week readings into the readings of God’s resurrection appearances, God’s sheep are shown as those who, after they turned from Him as He lay down His life for us, remain afraid when He returns to them, to us. Yet, He still, as the Good Shepherd, seeks after the members of His flock – His household to mix metaphors – that He might lead them to His place of good food and drink. That is why, Ezekiel began His Word to the faithful, to those who were

² *Isaiah 34:11.*

wandering, or are about to wander, on account of being led by false shepherds with God's promise:

For thus says Adonai YHWH (The LORD, I AM), "Behold, I then will search for My sheep and I will seek them out."³

From the Word of God given to Ezekiel prior to that promise, God proclaims that He will remove the false shepherds from their midst. Many of you will remember that this day's text was first declared after God had determined to drive His people from the Promised Land on account of the unrepentant sins of their leaders, and their sheepish following those called kings, priests, and Levites. On account of unrepentant sin, God's flock were about to be cast out from their homelands, driven by fear, compelled by human masters to live in lands far away. They were to receive the long overdue punishment their sins demanded from their Holy Shepherd.

Make no mistake in understanding: even though God, out of His merciful nature, deigns to delay in enacting His punishment for unrepented sins, He will, in His time, execute His judgments. The Word of God which convicts, condemns, and kills will be effected. And, for the times when those things are brought to be, to bring relief to the faithful, God's Word of acquittal, atonement, and enlivening will bring hope and peace. Hear again how both the certainty of punishment for sin and the comforting promise of recovery are given as the LORD, I AM says:

"As a shepherd seeks his flock in (the) day he is among his sheep being scattered, thus I will seek out My sheep; and I will cause to rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered in (a) day of clouds and darkness."⁴

³ *Isaiah 34:11.*

⁴ *Isaiah 34:12.*

What might we hear, learn, and believe from those words?

First, God reveals that, even when His sheep, His people are scattered in fear on account of the punishment that comes upon them from following false shepherds, or even wandering off from Him on their own, He is still with them, with us. The Biblical Hebrew of today's text declares that "when," not, "if" *they have been scattered in (a) day of clouds and darkness, God will be among his sheep being scattered.*

In time, that those words meant that, when the Kingdom of Judah was conquered in 586 BC, and its people deported, even though they could not see God's Presence among them over the Most Holy Place on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, God would still be with the faithful – and searching for the sinning, erring, and wandering among His flock. In time, during the years of Ezra-Nehemiah, God caused to fulfill His Word which says: *I will cause to rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered.*

God used human agents to enact His punishment for sin, for false shepherding, and for wandering from His Word. (It is not like they did not have forewarning. Their sinning, unrepentant relatives in Israel had been deported in 722 BC, and had not been able to return to their homes for over three generations). Then, in His time, when His wrath had been poured out on account of unrepentant sin, God used human agents to rescue those who had repented of their sins, and to return them to His fold. When these words of promise were first uttered, God's people were about to face

decades of captivity and deportation on account of their sins:

“And I will cause to bring them out of the peoples, and gather them from the lands, and I will cause to bring them into their land; and I will feed them in (the) mountains of Israel, in (the) fountains, and in all the inhabited places of the earth.”⁵

Perhaps you have noted the proper translation of God’s promises, rendered “I will cause...?” That use of language is done to declare that God uses agents, and mediated means, with which to fulfill His promises. In time, in history, God began fulfilling this promise through faithful royal and priestly leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah.

Yet, even in God’s causing to return His people to the Promised Land, many of them, the majority of them it seems from historical records, remained scattered. In fact, in time, those whom God had caused to return to Judah and Jerusalem would again be overrun by conquerors. Before God completed His promises to lead His wandering sheep back into His fold – in the Person of Jesus – they would be dominated by Greeks then Romans.

Maybe you grasp by now that the concrete historical realities of the diaspora (dispersion) and return were human images given by God to portray spiritual realities. That is to say, in returning a remnant physically to the land of Judah, God was, and is, displaying the reality, that through the means He has chosen, He will restore all who belong in His flock, to the eternal Promised Land. That is made clear when Jesus identifies Himself as God, using the words which indicate God’s Name, and Presence,

⁵ *Isaiah 34:13.*

with His people, even as He declares:

“I Am the Shepherd, the beautiful One, and I know mine and mine know Me. Just as the Father knows Me, and I know the Father, also My soul I place for the sheep.”⁶

Make no mistake, Jesus declares Himself to be not just a god, but the God who is the Shepherd Who is spoken of in the 23rd Psalm, and Who declares of Himself to and through Ezekiel: *“Behold, I then will search for My sheep and I will seek them out.”⁷* That means that God is showing Himself as being willing to get “down and dirty.” This day’s texts indicate that God willed to go beyond human agents in order to recover His lost sheep. He was telling of the time when He would come in-the-flesh in order to seek out His sheep who had been driven from His fold on account of following false shepherds and their own sinful desires. Following His “causal promises” which show His intent to return His wandering sheep to the Promised Land – fulfilled as you have heard by the return of some of the captives, and the rebuilding of the walls and Temple in Jerusalem, following those promises, God says:

“In good pasture I will feed them, and in mountains from (the) heights of Israel will be their pasture, there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and from fat pastures there they will feed in (the) mountains of Israel.”⁸

God declares that He will immediately, without mediated human instruments, feed His people. That He did when the eternal Son of God came to them, to us, in the Person of Jesus. Jesus, as you have heard, declares that He is the fulfillment of these promises. He leads His people into good pasture – where they may feed upon His

⁶ John 10:14-15.

⁷ Isaiah 34:11b.

⁸ Isaiah 34:14.

Word. He has placed them on the heights of the New Israel, having conquered for all time those high places as He was lifted up bearing the sins of all who will ever be called His people. As God came among His people, He established Good Food, eternal Food, for them, in which they, you, may receive His strengthening. Of this High Place of feeding, God declares:

"I will be Shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down," says Adonai YHWH (The LORD, I AM).⁹

Jesus says of Himself, that as the Good Shepherd,

"And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; and those it is necessary for me to lead; and My Voice they hear, and they will become one flock, one Shepherd."¹⁰

His words are fulfillment of the Word given to Ezekiel:

"The ones being lost, I will seek; and the strayed ones I will cause to bring back; and the crippled ones I will bind up; and the weak ones I will strengthen; but the fat ones and the strong ones I will cause to destroy: I will feed them in justice."¹¹

In Jesus, the Owner of the Flock, God's, will to seek the lost is fulfilled. He came to gather those who had wandered from the truth, those who had followed false shepherds. His is a personal promise to act, fulfilled in Christ, as He was lifted up upon the Cross to draw His people to Him.

Then, when Jesus sought out His lost ones, He sent forth human agents – the sent ones of His fold – to be His instruments to cause to bring back those who have strayed from His flock. They are given this simple means of God's Word and Sacraments with which to recover those, you, who so often stray from His Word. In that Word, God

⁹ *Isaiah 34:15.*

¹⁰ *John 10:16.*

¹¹ *Isaiah 34:16.*

promises to act – to bind up those crippled on account of sin; to strengthen those who are weakened by their wandering from God’s flock. That is all Good News.

Yet, it is Good News that is followed with bad news. For, even in the midst of the realities declared that in Himself, and through His means God recovers the wandering members of His flock, God will bring His justice upon those who have, and do, and will, lead His people astray. The fat and strong sheep are those who trample the good food of God’s pastures under their feet. They, by their words and practice, show they despise the Lord’s gifts given from His Holy Place, the Food from His Table. They, by their deeds and teaching, soil and trouble the still waters of God’s means of grace through the Water and the Word.

Fear not when you who remain faithful to God’s Word behold false shepherds soiling and troubling God’s good food and quiet waters. Even as God once led those scattered on account of sin and following false shepherds, He will one, day lead those who are even now suffering under the spiritual headship of those who are leading them from the Truth, remove them from our midst. Christ is risen!

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Resurrection III (*LSB One-year series*)

Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34:11-16; I Peter 2:21-25; John 10:11-16

April 14, 2013

Pastor Michael A. Morehouse

Soli Deo Gloria

“The hired man then, not being the Shepherd, for whom the sheep are not his own, sees the wolf coming, and forsakes the sheep, and flees – then the wolf snatches them, and he scatters (them) – because he remains (a) hired man and has no concern for the sheep.”¹²

God through St. Peter says, “were all as wandering sheep, have been returned now by the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls,”¹³

¹² John 10:12-13.

¹³ I Peter 2:25.