

IN NOMINE JESU

OF THE BEAUTIFUL SHEPHERD, SHEEP, SHEEPDOGS, AND WOLVES

Christ is Risen!

Hear again the Word of God for this third Sunday in the season of the Resurrection of our Lord:

“As a shepherd seeks his flock in (the) day in which his sheep are 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

This is the Sunday often nicknamed Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year, on this Sunday of the Resurrection season, for centuries, God’s people have heard of the Beautiful Shepherd, Sheep, Sheepdogs, and Wolves. Now, one of those four categories is not drawn directly from the Scriptures. Even so, it fits within the overarching thrust of today’s texts. Which is it?

For years, many of you have been led rightly into thinking of God as the Good or Beautiful Shepherd, His people as His sheep, and the devil or false shepherds as the wolves. However, this year, this sermon follows a thread of biblically led thinking that which we have discussed here over the past eleven years. Today we consider that there is an appropriate fourth category that can be used to help us understand the pastoral illustrations God’s Word uses for Good Shepherd Sunday. That is that of God taking from the flock those whom He turns into sheepdogs. These sheepdogs work under the commands of the Good Shepherd to guide and guard His

¹ Isaiah 34:12.

flock, to drive away the wolves, and to keep order among the sheep and lambs. That image can serve as a reminder for the sheep, and other sheepdogs, to observe, hear, and evaluate whether their sheepdogs hold to the Good Shepherds voice. If they do not, they will turn into wolves!

The sheepdog-wolf image is drawn from a study done years ago. In the book entitled, "On Killing," former West Point professor of psychology, LTC(Ret) Dave Grossman describes citizens, citizen soldiers, and the ones who turn rogue from that second group in terms of sheep, sheepdogs, and wolves.² This congregation can be comfortable with illustrations drawn from military experience.

First, you all know that the Scriptures contain numerous references to, and put forth analogies from, ancient military service. Second, in this place, about twenty percent of our membership has served, or is serving, in the United States Armed Forces. Still others of our membership have served, or are still serving, in law enforcement. Even more of you are related to those who have served, or continue to serve to protect the interests of the citizens of our nation at home and abroad. Those who so serve, particularly in the military, are the ones Grossman names, sheepdogs, who need to be watched by other sheepdogs and the sheep to ensure they do not turn into wolves. With that background in mind, hear again the beginning of today's text. Ezekiel's words continue to declare God's portrayal of himself and his faithful people,

² Internet. <https://www.killology.com>. Accessed April 29, 2017.

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

From the Psalm of the day, into the Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel readings heard, we learn of God the Good Shepherd and His flock. When Ezekiel's words were first proclaimed, God's people had been wandering from His green pastures for several centuries. Their brothers and sisters in the North, Israel as it was called as David and Solomon's United Kingdom dissolved, had been driven from their land for about 125 years. This had been due to their unfaithfulness to God's Word.

Ten tribes were gone. They were torn away from God's fold through deportation, to be not recovered again in this fallen creation. Their removal, a real scattering on account of wolves within and without, stood as an example and call to repentance to the two remaining tribes of the Israelites in the Promised Land.

Those who were living in the South, Judah, had been allowed by God to receive continued refreshment by receiving His gifts mediated through the Old Covenant sacrifices. God continued to send them prophets, and faithful shepherds, to call them repeatedly to turn from their sinful ways and remain in God's green pastures - found most clearly in the Temple in Jerusalem of Judah. It is to those who were still called "My people," by God, who were residing yet in the Promised Land, and who were found faithful in receiving His gifts, that the Word through the prophet calls out,

³ *Isaiah 34:11.*

For thus says Adonai YHWH, "Behold, I then will search for My sheep and I will seek them out."⁴

The Good Shepherd Word of promise begins with that which we translate, "For thus..." That means some thought is being brought to a conclusion. That teaches about God's called and ordained shepherds, who today we identify as sheepdogs, whom God had called to watch over and tend His sheep, His people. The sheepdogs, civil rulers (kings) and priests, had turned from their callings. They had ceased following their Shepherd even as they gave faithless ritual attention to God's Word.

The Word before today's Good News reading declares that God's sheepdogs had, through their unrepentant unfaithfulness to His Word, become wolves. They had done so for the sake of their own bellies, egos, positions, and luxury. God's priests, Levites, and kings, those men who were to serve Him to and on behalf of His sheep had become wolves. They were, as Ezekiel was prophesying, devouring the resources of the sheep. The sheepdogs turned wolves had turned from faithful attentiveness to the right division (Law - Gospel) and practice of the Word of God. They had equipped the sheep to stray from God's fold to follow other gods.

God's sheepdogs become wolves had also led the sheep into trust in human rulers for their salvation from the wolves outside their land. The Judahite kings, in their God-given roles of sheepdogs to defend His people, His sheep, from the

⁴ *Isaiah 34:11.*

wolves without, had formed alliances with them! The strongest of those external wolves – the Babylonians – were even then descending upon faithful people of God left in Judah.

The faithful remnant, God’s true sheep, were in fear. Even as Ezekiel began his prophecy, they beheld Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar’s army besieging and subduing Jerusalem. They could behold the coming terror of captivity and deportation. The faithful among them needed to hear their Good Shepherd’s Word. To them, from whom He continued to promise to remove the sheepdogs turned wolves, that He declares,

For thus says Adonai YHWH (The LORD, I AM), “Behold, I then will search for My sheep and I will seek them out.”⁵

The Lord, I AM, reminds his true sheep, those who continue to hear His Voice and follow Him through His proclaimed Word, that He will find them, wherever they may be. His Word declares that, whenever He drives from them the wolves within and without, He will seek out the faithful. All the work of finding them, and restoring them to His green pastures is His. That is made clear through our theme text, which still proclaims:

“As a shepherd seeks his flock in (the) day in which his sheep are 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.”⁶

⁵ Isaiah 34:11.

⁶ Isaiah 34:12.

Jesus uses that imagery to declare that He is the Good, or Beautiful Shepherd Who seeks out God's faithful remnant. He declares Himself to be the fulfillment of that promise given some 595 years before His incarnation. Jesus, God-in-our-flesh, enters into His sheepfold, takes on the wolves from within and without, and conquers them with His blood.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is all that is good, wholesome, perfect, sinless, and holy. All those attributes may be summed up in one word – beautiful. That word declares that He is far more than good. Because Jesus laid down His soul, His life, for His sheep, we declare and know Him to be the Promised One who would search for, seek out, and rescue His people. This prophecy is found completed in only one Man:

“As a shepherd seeks his flock in (the) day in which his sheep are 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.”⁷

The Good Shepherd took on the image of a faithful sheep, having clothed Himself in our flesh. Beginning in Bethlehem, the Word of His coming went forth. It was carried into Jerusalem, Egypt, Nazareth, Capernaum, wider Galilee, into the regions of Tyre and Sidon, back to Jerusalem, onto the cross, and into the grave. Remember, the Scripture you heard just a couple of weeks ago describes the sixth to the night hour of Good Friday as being covered in darkness and thick shadow. Did you hear in that the majority, Advent to the Triduum, of the first half of the Church

⁷ Isaiah 34:12.

Year described as fulfilled in Christ?

From there the Word of the Good Shepherd went into all the nations beginning in Jerusalem, into Galilee, to all nations on one day; then to Ethiopia, Galatia, Syria, greater Africa, ancient Asia, and Spain. It continued to spread, into greater Europe, to India, to the Americas, to Japan, and China, to Antarctica, into space, and onto the moon (many still remember God's Word read by the astronauts). Did you hear in all that the remainder of the first half of the Church Year, Resurrection through Pentecost, described as fulfilled in Christ? Hear the Word of promise that God used to draw you into His fold:

*"And I will cause to bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the lands, and I will cause to bring them out 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."*⁸

The Good Shepherd continues to call into His fold - the green pastures and still waters of the Church - all those who have been scattered, since the day of His death. Christ Jesus continues to fulfill this ancient Word, as he draws into His Church, His sheep. He declares,

*"In good pastures I will feed them, and in mountains from (the) heights of Israel will be their pastures, there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and from fat pastures they will feed in (the) mountains of Israel."*⁹

God Himself has called you here, into His earthly place of rest, even as you

⁸ Isaiah 34:13.

⁹ Isaiah 34:14.

await your eternal rest. God has granted you the food of immortality – His proclaimed Word – and when you believe, confess, and apprehend it – His Visible Word from His table. He has raised up from the sheep those whom He has called to be sheepdogs. We, pastors and congregational administrative leaders, are given by Him to guard and keep His flock in this given place that His sheep, you, might continue to hear your Beautiful Shepherd. God still says,

“The lost I will seek; and the strayed 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.”¹⁰

The Word of Promise to God’s faithful sheep, to you, ends with a word of warning. The Good Shepherd Who tends to the needs of His sheep – feeding them, you, with His Word and Sacraments – also declares that He will tend to those sheep whom He calls to be sheepdogs, should He behold them becoming wolves. His Word and the reality of its fulfillment on the wolves of ancient Israel and Judah stand as examples to those who follow after sheepdogs turned wolves today. The justice that was fulfilled on ancient Judah, as priests, Levites, Jerusalem and Temple were destroyed and burned, is a justice that is coming to those who rend and tear the Lord’s flock from within.

Pray for your leaders – those who are the sheepdogs drawn from the flock to keep you in God’s Word. Lift up your leaders – those who are the sheepdogs drawn

¹⁰ Isaiah 34:16.

from the flock to keep the business of this congregation according to God's will.

Encourage them, us, in the Word. Help them, as they help you, to hear and receive God's gifts, that we might continue to be one flock, under one Shepherd, Christ Jesus.

The Church, in the Lutheran community in Tucson, is again under attack from wolves from without. You are free, as those fed and watered by God's Word, following Christ Jesus, to pray for those who are even now struggling from the bites and tearing jaws of those who follow Satan. You know that our Good Shepherd cares for them too. This Word of promise is for them, as it is for you:

"As a shepherd seeks his flock in (the) day in which his sheep are 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."¹¹

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

Resurrection III (One-year series)

Psalm 33:1, 33:5b, 6a; Ezekiel 34:11-16; I Peter 2:21-25; John 10:11-16; Psalm 23

April 30, 2017

Pastor Michael A. Morehouse

Soli Deo Gloria

¹¹ Isaiah 34:12.