

November 26, 2017
Last Sunday of the Church Year

The King of Love My Shepherd Is

Ezekiel 34:11-16

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me . . . The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out (John 10:14, 3)." People seem to adore the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Many congregations have beautiful pictures of Jesus carrying a lamb on his shoulder, or holding a lamb, feeding a lamb, or watching over lambs. Just about everybody seems to know Psalm 23 - "the Lord is my shepherd." It is designed to be a comforting picture of how Jesus feeds, leads, protects, and cares for us as we walk through "the valley of the shadow of death."

A further truth that might NOT be so warm and fuzzy is that sheep are, for the most part, dumb and helpless, and shepherds were considered to be low class people in Biblical times. I find it rather interesting that Jesus and the sheep are in the same "crowd," so to speak. Certainly, Christ is willing to humble himself to serve in low places. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, not so much like we might say that someone is doing a good job (certainly our Savior does), but rather he is the Good Shepherd because he really cares and pours his goodness into feeding and leading his sheep for their well being. Everything he may do or not do has in mind the best interest of the sheep.

Out of many passages that we might cite, where Jesus is called a shepherd and we the sheep of his pasture, is our Old Testament lesson, which might be unfamiliar. Those of us who have studied the book of Ezekiel will recall that our text for this morning is in the midst of a book that is rather heavy with condemnation and judgment. There are many descriptions of God's wrath against Jerusalem for her unfaithfulness, idolatry, political stupidity, and her desire to be like all the other nations who have no regard for God and his holy Word. The people were living in the Babylonian exile, which served as a picture of the judgment of God. This whole picture further extends into the exile that the people of God will feel at the very end of time proceeding the day of judgment. Still, what we see is that God is doing good things. He will use such things to bring repentance, and preserve and rescue the remnant of his people. In this stern book, God holds out the promise of the gospel and the hope of heaven in the background of judgment day:

For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice."

There is a lot of gospel in this passage that makes us feel good, but this gospel should also be heard in the context of the hard warning at the end of it. It is terrifying when you understand what is being said.

The sleek and strong sheep will be destroyed. We are talking about what appears to be true sheep in the midst of the flock. He will feed them with eternal destruction and throw them into hell. Keep in mind that this is still the Good Shepherd. As one can see, his goodness also means that he is just and will make right judgments. The question is: are we the sleek and strong sheep? But, before one can begin to wrestle with that question, one must first ask: what does it mean to be sleek and strong sheep? We may not like the answer.

Sleek and strong sheep are the apathetic. The sin is apathy. What is being talked about here is the same stuff that is found in Revelation 3:15-16, where Jesus threatens to spit out the lukewarm church in Laodicea, the one that is neither hot nor cold since it has acquired riches and believes that it is in need of nothing more. These are the wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked sheep. Louis A. Brighton comments on this passage in Revelation (it's a fairly long quote), but what he says might as well be commentary for our text in the book of Ezekiel regarding sleek and strong sheep. The lukewarm and sleek, strong sheep are all in the same "ballpark." He writes:

The church was living primarily for earthly wealth and selfish desires. The works the Christians were producing from such an attitude demonstrated neither anger nor enthusiasm toward God. Their lives and their plans and their hopes were self-centered. Faith and love toward God in a life of service were of secondary importance, at best. This apathy toward God's Word of stinging Law and comforting Gospel is utterly distasteful to God While Christ in patience forgives a Christian who sins even seventy-seven times and who lives in sorrow and repentance and always looks to God for mercy (Mt 18:21-22), the Lord does not tolerate a life of imagined self-sufficiency which needs no repentance and no forgiveness (cf. Lk 12:16-21). Such a state of lukewarmness is like being dead. To warn the church of such a final judgment, the Lord Christ speaks a terrifying and harsh word of Law, for he would wake the church from its spiritual torpor [lethargy], which puts it in danger of eternal death.

Now that we understand, let's ask the question again: are we the sleek and strong sheep? The truth is that there is this kind of thing in all of us. Prayerfully, we are not being ruled by it, but putting it to death. God gathers the flock and then he destroys the sleek and strong. The Good Shepherd does not pour his goodness into sheep who are full of themselves, but he helps those who are in need of help. The books of Ezekiel and Revelation would empty us of ourselves that we might be given that which truly satisfies. Jesus would feed and satisfy us with himself. These words are designed to shake us up so that we repent of this apathy, putting it to death by his death, and then receiving the forgiveness of sins and that which truly satisfies - Jesus our Good Shepherd. It is a good thing to be the "injured" and "weak" sheep, so that Jesus may feed us with himself and lead us to heaven.

The King of Love My Shepherd Is! That's the theme of the sermon for this morning. He is the king of truth, and he rules all things for the flock in order that the flock might "lie down in good grazing land," as it says in Ezekiel. It is all about his love for us, and his love is the giving of himself. He is the way, the truth, and the life, and the life went to the cross where life was given up in order that we might have life, and have it to the full!

The Good Shepherd himself says: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). And he promises to gather his flock together from where they were scattered as on a cloudy and gloomy day. To those of us who are believers down here in this fallen world, it is the Good Shepherd who is feeding and leading us in his holy Word. This is the real life of abundance and purity - the abundance of God's Word and Sacraments where Jesus is found. One day, all of this will give way to what we call the kingdom of glory, which is the presence of the living Jesus without preaching, water, bread and wine. As it says in 2 Timothy 4:18: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever!"

This is certainly one of the reasons why we so love the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd. We especially love the consolation of the "still waters" and "green pastures" and a "table" where our Lord gives us himself and all good things. Indeed! We look forward to the kingdom of glory, the consummation of the kingdom of heaven, where words such as those written in Revelation 7 make their way into our hearts today, and are finally and absolutely fulfilled at the end: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. *For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd*, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:16-17)."

Did you catch it? "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd!" The Lamb who reigns, the king of love, the one who became one of us to save us, the shepherd/lamb who sacrificed himself on the altar of the cross, will shepherd us forever as he identifies himself with us! One of us is in charge, and he will rule all things for his beloved flock. Even now he is doing that, and his reign will never end. Indeed! **The King of Love My Shepherd Is!**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott