

GOD GATHERS HIS SHEEP
LAST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

EZEK 34:11-16, 20-24
NOV. 23, 2014

¹¹ "For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. ¹⁶ 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, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

²⁰ "Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, ²² I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³ 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. ²⁴ And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken.

If you come from family with more than couple of children
you can probably remember when mom & dad were gone
and left older brother or sister in charge
and things did not go so well
maybe younger ones just did what they wanted
maybe older one got bossy.

It was a relief when parents came home & took over
and everyone knew they would be taken care of.

On this last Sun of church year, we look toward Christ's return.

At his ascension, he assigned disciples the job
of sharing the gospel, spreading the kingdom.

This is happening among us, but things don't always go well.

We look forward to Jesus' return on the last day

to take care of everything

but also watch for the ways he comes to us today

to take care of us as our Shepherd.

GOD SEEKS OUT THOSE WHO ARE SCATTERED

GOD DEALS WITH THOSE TAKING ADVANTAGE GOD FEEDS THE GATHERED FLOCK

GOD SEEKS OUT THOSE WHO ARE SCATTERED

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Prophet Ezekiel speaks at time when Israel was scattered.

Years before, after king Solomon's reign,
northern tribes rebelled against his domineering son.

They replaced worship at God's temple in Jerusalem
with various idols. One corrupt king replaced another.

They had been overrun by Assyrians & scattered to winds.

Judah, the southern kingdom, was not much better.

Now, the Babylonians had taken over
some, including Ezekiel, already exiles in Babylon.

Those left kept trying to revolt & become independent
but it would not be long before they were destroyed.

It was a dark, dismal day, storm clouds were on horizon.

There are similarities in the new Israel, God's church, today.

The worldwide church is fractured into many groups.

Some have wandered so far from God's word of truth
they are barely recognizable as Christian.

Others compete for influence with different messages
that make it hard to know what to believe.

Even among those who affirm same beliefs & teachings,
complete unity and harmony is often elusive.

Sometimes we see this close to home

when church members don't get along
or isolate themselves from gathering for worship.

or when we see family members wandering from the faith
or divided between various churches or other religions.

We look around in fear and frustration, wondering what to do
when we become isolated and feel vulnerable.
But the Good Shepherd says to Ezekiel and to us
that he himself is the one who gathers his flock.
It was a day of clouds and thick darkness
when God first gathered Israel & brought them out of Egypt
and he used the darkness to hide them from enemies.
That very dark cloud became a sign of God's presence.
God did bring Israel back again from the nations to own land
as Ezekiel said, in time for Jesus to be born there.
Jesus did come to seek and save the lost
and he has brought us to faith in the first place
and gathered us into the flock of his church.
and continues to call out to us in his word.
He does not abandon us even when we stray.
he is the one who can strengthen the weak
by the work of his Holy Spirit given in Baptism.
he is the one who can bind up broken relationships
and hurt feelings with his love & forgiveness.
God continues to work to bring us together
before he gathers us before his throne on judgment day
to separate the sheep and the goats.
Zechariah hints at that day, saying God will the destroy
the fat and strong. What is problem with being fat & strong?
Sometimes even sheep get pushy.

GOD DEALS WITH THOSE TAKING ADVANTAGE

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will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you
push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns,
till you have scattered them abroad, ²² I will rescue my flock; they shall
no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep.

In any group of animals there is pushing and testing for position,
which one will be first in line to drink or get most food.
Especially when resources seem limited,
the runt of the litter gets pushed aside.
one that seems weak gets henpecked by all the others.
We tend to see this behavior in stores Fri. after Thanksgiving,
people pushing and shoving to get there first
and get the best deal for self

When people feel vulnerable & stressed they are tempted
to look out for themselves at expense of others
In difficult times we take advantage of the weak.
In other verses near this text, Ezekiel speaks of sheep & goats.
Ancient shepherds usually had some goats with sheep,
They were used as leaders for sheep.
Goats Jesus separates out of his flock in gospel
may be ones Ezekiel sees shoving others around.
Leaders, responsible for seeing that others are cared for
are tempted to use power for own purposes instead.
In verses before text, Ezekiel points out how the leaders
who were responsible for enforcing justice and fairness
misused their power and were abusive shepherds
who feed themselves but not the flock.
All leaders need to be warned of this danger.
But God has given us Jesus as a leader who is the opposite.
The good shepherd lays down his own life for sheep.
Before Jesus comes again in glory as judge
he laid aside his glory and power to become weak.
He was led as lamb to slaughter to be sacrifice for us,
taking on himself the judgment for all our sins.
Now he sees to it that we do not need to push and shove others
to get what we need in life
because he abundantly provides all we need.

GOD FEEDS THE GATHERED FLOCK

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²³ 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. ²⁴ And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken.

In Hebrew, word for shepherd is form of word for feed.

Our shepherd is the one who feeds us.

This is the purpose for which he has gathered us
into the flock of his church and the pasture of this place.
He wants to feed us with his word,

to fill us with roughage of his law & sweetness of gospel.
This is what we need most to make us strong
and not vulnerable to attacks of the devil.
Man does not live on bread alone but ever word
that comes from the mouth of God.
But he does also use bread along with God's word
to feed us Jesus own body & blood in Holy Communion
for the forgiveness of our sins.
This food is found only on the mountain heights of Israel,
that is, the peak and climax of Christian worship.
In this church, God uses under-shepherds, pastors,
to feed and guide his flock
But Ezekiel remind these shepherds are always imperfect.
The one shepherd over all is the descendant of David,
the rightful king.
We listen & believe not because a human shepherd says so
but because God is the Lord and he has spoken.
Jesus does not push to get his own way or force us to obey
but uses his power to take care of us
& lovingly uses word to move us where we need to be.
This is why all of us, both followers and leaders,
eagerly look forward to his return on the last day.
He has already gathered us into his flock.

GOD SEEKS OUT THOSE WHO ARE SCATTERED

He will not leave us isolated, alone and fragmented.

GOD DEALS WITH THOSE TAKING ADVANTAGE

When we feel vulnerable, we are tempted to
look out for ourselves at the expense of others
but we do not need to push for this because

GOD FEEDS THE GATHERED FLOCK

He gathers us here to feed us on his word & sacraments
and he is coming again to gather us into heaven
where we will feast with him forever.