

LBCC SERMON

Nov 22, 2020

Lord God, you are the great and good shepherd. You tend and nourish your flock. You protect us as a mother hen protects her little chicks. You seek the lost and the strayed. You gather together those who call your name. You bind up the injured and feed your flock with justice.

What are we to say to this? Our refrain is one of praise and thanks-giving. Our recall is one of gratitude and comfort. Our response is to welcome the stranger, visit the sick and the imprisoned, clothe the naked, and feed the hungry and thirsty. Our resolution is to trust your judgment and claim our righteousness through our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that we are able to hear your voice amidst the noise of our world. Give us the will to follow your voice. Amen.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 "I Myself will"

Thus, says the Lord GOD: **I myself will** search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so **I will** seek out my sheep. **I will** rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. **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 watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. **I will** feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. **I myself** will be the shepherd of my sheep, and **I will** make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. **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, but the fat and the strong **I will** destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: **I myself will** judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, **I will** save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and **I will** judge between sheep and sheep.

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, the LORD, have spoken.

If ever one doubted God's care and concern for God's people, doubt no longer! Count the number of "I wills" in this text. God is the good shepherd.

Shepherding was not an easy life. In the first place, the sheep did not usually belong to the shepherd. He was there simply to protect the interests of the owner. The shepherd was just a laborer, a worker. The task was not some mission or vocation. It was just a job, a menial one at that. The pay was poor, and the working conditions were horrendous. It was a dirty job, a 24/7 job that few wanted. The shepherd was expected to care for all the sheep: the sick, the injured, the dumb, the bull-headed. Caring for the sheep demanded that a shepherd sleep lightly, lest some human predator sneak in and steal the sheep or some animal predator sneak in and devour them.

Shepherding was a lonely life. The shepherd would leave family to take the sheep high up into the hills to graze. He had no companion for conversation, no associate to help, no partner for comfort if ill or injured. The shepherd was subject to the weather, enduring heat or cold, wind or rain. Sheep required constant attention so they didn't wander off and become lost. And because sheep are so dumb, they would frequently follow another with little or no regard as to where they were going. Being a shepherd would not rank high on anyone's list of job preferences.

Consequently, most shepherds were not that reliable. After all, what was in it for him? The hard work required of the shepherd brought little gain, little or no recognition – even from the owner. The shepherd's attitude was not likely to be very positive. So what if a few sheep wander off? So what if a few become injured or die? So what if the grazing is poor and the sheep become malnourished? Why should the shepherd care?

The leaders of Israel were shepherds as well. These kings were appointed to care for God’s “livestock,” the people of Israel, “my sheep” as God called them. But these earthly shepherds cared little for their people, allowing them to be overrun by enemies and scattered throughout the land. These shepherds cared greatly for themselves, dining on scrumptious buffets and ignoring their flock, which had been entrusted to them. They treated their people harshly, impatiently, and with great force. They ignored the sick, the injured, and the impoverished. Israel was a land of ruins.

Enter Ezekiel, the prophet, God’s spokesperson. In the passages preceding our text, God condemns these leaders through Ezekiel and reclaims the authority to care for Israel. Speaking for God, Ezekiel says, “You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (v. 4). Therefore, says God, because my sheep have become prey and because there were no shepherds, I am against the shepherds, and I will rescue my sheep.

“For thus says the Lord God,” our lesson begins, “I myself will search for my sheep” (v. 2). And with that proclamation, God begins a litany of promises of how that care will be initiated and undertaken. God leaves no room for doubt as to intentions. God is no mere “hired hand.” In a series of statements that start with “I will” God promises to keep and care for Israel, the people of God – the sheep of God, if you will.

God's love for Israel (as it is for us) is extravagant. The care of God will include seeking and finding the lost. God will bring them all together and gather them into one entity. God will feed them the very best, feeding on rich pastures and pure water. God will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. God will judge the sheep and feed them with justice. Now, a question arises that we need to explore.

Who are the people of God? Is it only Israel? Is it only the people of the New Covenant, the Christian church? Are the people of Islamic faith also the people of God? Hindus and Buddhists? Atheists and agnostics? Gay and straight? Is God the good shepherd of some particular group of people, or is God the good shepherd of everyone – believers and unbelievers, the doubters and the uncertain?

In John 10, Jesus tells his followers that he is the good shepherd and then goes on to tell them what that means in terms of who are defined as the people of God. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice" (Jn 10:16).

Does not that proclamation indicate the wide expanse of God's people? I think so. Does not that proclamation also indicate the universal nature of God's people? Again, I think so. We have a very inclusive God, which means that the good news in Jesus Christ is not just for a select few, but for all of humanity.

Not just for a select few of like-minded “sheep,” but even for those who hear God’s voice in a way different from our own. What does that mean to us? It means that we have no exclusive claim as the people of God. It means that we treat everyone as God’s chosen ones. It means that we refrain from judging others; rather, we love one another as Jesus loves us.

Based on the conflict and tension that exists in our world (as well as our own human nature), we know that the unity of all is not from us, but from God, the good shepherd, who speaks a word of unity. “I will save my flock, and they will no longer be ravaged” (Ezek 34:22). God, the good shepherd, will gather the scattered, seek the lost, and bring back the strayed. Thus says the Lord God! **“Let us Pray”**

Lord God, you have blessed us beyond measure. You have cared for us in every way possible. You have called our names and gathered us to your side. We know who we are and whose we are. And now, in return for your gracious love, we offer our gifts, not only to you, but to the world.

We pledge our concern for your creation. We pledge our care of your people. We pledge our dependence upon your great mercy. We offer ourselves, trusting your goodness. Receive what we humbly offer, and in your power multiply it for the benefit of your kingdom. Teach us to appreciate what is given to us that we might share liberally with others. In the name of our good shepherd, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.