

Written Copy: Ezekiel 34:15-16 “The Job Only God Can Do-Through Us”

14th Sunday @ Pentecost – Proper 19

Sunday, September 11th, 2022

Text: Ezekiel 34:15-16

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.

Exegetical Statement (the text’s context)

The LORD has words of chastisement against the religious leaders of Israel, the kings, the priests, the prophets and scribes, all those charged with caring for His people’s (His flock’s) temporal and spiritual care. They were guilty of taking advantage to them by not sharing the blessings given by the LORD for all, and even worse not teaching and keeping them in steadfast faith toward Him. Still the LORD refers to them as His flock and His shepherds, calling out to them to repent. But they refused to listen and as a result, both of the exiles happened, the Assyrians came and exiled most of the people to other parts of their kingdom, forcing them to intermarry with non-Israelites in order to deaden national pride and keep them from revolting. And Babylon marched the Jews back to their country, from where Ezekiel writes. But the LORD did not forget His lost and wandering sheep. He Himself promises to come and gather them from all the places they were carried off to. This was partially fulfilled 40 years later when the exiles in Babylon were allowed to return home to the mountains of Jerusalem. But a more complete fulfillment came when the LORD Himself came, Jesus Christ, the greater son of David, who called Himself the Good Shepherd. He came and strengthened the weak, healed the sick, and called back the lost to faith through His suffering, death, and resurrection. The LORD Himself continues to call out to the lost sheep of Israel, who are now Gentiles, through His work in the Church as we proclaim the Gospel. All this will culminate in His angels gathering together all those who were once lost but have been found to His presence on the Last Day. None deserve this gracious work He does. He does it all out of love for us, desiring that no one be eternally lost but join Him in His everlasting sheepfold.

Focus Statement:

The LORD Himself came as the Good Shepherd who strengthened the weak, healed the sick, and calls back the lost through the work of the Church proclaiming the Gospel of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. He empowers us as the Church and individually to be His means of going after them. And He is concerned about the one, each soul is important to Him, those among us who are straying, those who live around us who are un-churched, even if they don’t look like us.

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

We are charged with seeking and finding the lost sheep around us. But sometimes we forget who they are, those who have been gone for a long time, those that don’t look or dress like us.

What the hearer should do as a result:

See themselves as the means through which God the Holy Spirit is working to call back and keep in faith their brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as those we meet by divine appointment.

Subject Sentence: The Good Shepherd Calls Lost Sheep Through Us

Introduction:

There once was a man who grew up in the Church. His parents took him faithfully to Sunday School and afterward to worship. He learned the Bible Stories in Sunday School, learned who Jesus was, and was convicted that he was a sinner. He listened to the Pastor preach each Sunday how a Christian was supposed to live a God-pleasing life and what that looked like. But try as hard as he might he found he could not do it; he could not achieve the perfection that God required of all those who would be His children. And as he got older, he noticed how the leaders in the congregation weren't really living that kind of life either. They looked like it on Sundays at church, but during the week that was an entirely different story. So, he left the fold. He left spiritually speaking when he was 15 years old. He left physically when he turned 18 years old and didn't come back for a long time. Many who knew him at that church had written him off as lost, not even worth the effort of going after.

Well, that young man grew up, got married, had kids. And when his kids came along, he felt he needed to bring them up in the Church just as he had. So, he tried returning to the congregation of his youth. They were having a Church Picnic at a campground where many of the members were camping for Labor Day weekend. It was a nice, warm, breezy day. The sun was out. It was a great day for a picnic. The young man was excited to reconnect with people he remembered growing up. Except they weren't excited to reconnect with him. When he and his parents came to sit down at the main table, they found their place settings had been moved to another table some distance away. It seems that he and his family were taking up space where the "*real members*" of the Church sat. He didn't look like them, with long hair and an earring. They remembered how he left, and some of the trouble he had gotten into as a youth. They didn't seem to think he belonged with them anymore.

This is not a new story. It's been around for a long time. It harkens back to our Old Testament Lesson about shepherds and sheep who wander away, and are pushed out of the flock.

The Shepherds and Lost Sheep of Ezekiel

In our Old Testament Lesson, the LORD has given the prophet Ezekiel an analogy about sheep and shepherds to describe the deplorable spiritual state that God's chosen people, Israel had fallen into. The idea of shepherding sheep was very familiar to God's people since they had been keepers of sheep going all the way back to the days of the Patriarch Abraham. In the analogy the sheep represent God's people of both the 10 tribes that made up the Northern Kingdom of Israel, as well as the two tribes that made up the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The shepherds were those put in place to care for them: the kings, priests, prophets, and scribes; all those who were supposed to provide for His flock's temporal and spiritual welfare.

Except that's not what they were doing. They were caring for themselves first and foremost. In a temporal sense they were gathering unto themselves all the wealth that the LORD had blessed each kingdom with, which He intended to be shared with all those He had placed in their care. Instead of sharing they consumed this "good pasture", taking the best of everything for themselves, and leaving a trampled field, the leftovers that they didn't want, for those who didn't have enough to begin with. They didn't attend to those who were injured, they didn't help the widows and invalids-those who were unable to work for themselves. But worst of all, in the spiritual sense, they did not point the flock toward faithful worship of the LORD. They modeled everything from worship being all about what one did, and nothing about the gracious gifts God was giving them through the sacrificial system, to an empty going through the motions, to a mixing in of elements of the idol worship their neighbors engaged in, to out-right worship of idols, even demanding that the people join in with them in forsaking faith and worship of the LORD God who rescued them from Egypt and gave them this land.

For this reason, the sheep of the LORD's flock of both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom were taken into exile. The LORD used the hand of the mighty nation of Assyria to invade and conquer the Northern Kingdom. Just as the LORD described to Ezekiel, His flock was driven away from their home pasture and became lost. Assyria took most of the people away to be exiled among the other nations they had conquered, forcing them to intermarry with these Gentile nations and so water down and eliminate any national pride they had. These 10 Tribes of the Northern Kingdom functionally became Gentiles and are the "lost tribes of Israel". In the Southern Kingdom of Judah, while they had a few bright spots of kings and priests who led the flock to keep the faith, toward the end, their leaders wandered away from the faith and turned evil too. And so, the LORD sent the mighty nation of Babylon to invade, conquer, and destroy Jerusalem, carrying His sheep off into exile, driving them away from the pasture land that the LORD had graciously provided.

Ezekiel's message from the LORD contained judgment and consequences for the leaders who proved to be failures as shepherds caring for His sheep, allowing them to wander from the faith. But His message was not all negative. It included a wonderful promise of what was to come. **Ezekiel 34:12-13** 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.** The LORD was not going to rely on human leaders to save His people. He was going to do it Himself. This promise was partially fulfilled when the LORD worked with His mighty hand through the King of Persia, Cyrus, who conquered Babylon. The LORD's mighty hand moved this unbelieving king to send His exiled sheep back home to Jerusalem.

Ezekiel Prophecy fulfilled in Jesus' Time

Fast forward to Jesus' time. The Jews of Jesus day are the descendants of these former exiles returned home. While they learned their lesson about idol worship, the shepherd leaders that the LORD raised up to care for His flock became no better than those before them. The Pharisees, Sadducees, the priests, and scribes; all who were supposed to shepherd God's flock, took advantage of their positions of power. Ezekiel wrote prophetically when he said (**Ezekiel 34:18-19**) **¹⁸ Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? ¹⁹ And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?** These leaders saw themselves as better than the rest because they keep the law perfectly, at least in their own eyes. They muddied the water that is God's word by making salvation all about works, about law keeping and perfect sacrifices instead of God's gracious gift. They judged that the tax collectors and others who didn't follow the laws like they did, those that they called "sinners", had no place in the sheepfold of God's kingdom. In our Gospel Lesson, we see them judging Jesus for having anything to do with those they judged to be unworthy. **Luke 15:1-2 ¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."**

They saw Jesus eating and hanging out with these cast-offs and regarded Him as no better than the sinners He hung with. But what they failed to recognize is that He had come to fulfill the prophetic word the LORD spoke through Ezekiel. **Ezekiel 34:22-24 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.** Jesus had come to be that One Shepherd, He who was in His humanity born in the line of King David, from the line and house of David. Jesus was David's greater Son to whom the LORD promised a kingdom that would never end. He came to serve as the Good Shepherd who was in fact God come to earth. He was God Himself who came to personally rescue His flock. He came to feed them the true Word of God, teaching that salvation comes only from God as His precious gift.

And that precious gift was the Good Shepherd Himself laying down His life for His sheep. He came not to rule over them as did the religious leaders of the day, but to be the once and for all sacrifice, the sacrificial lamb who died in place of all the sheep who had strayed, and all the shepherds who had acted out of sinful selfishness and arrogance. He came to be the bread from heaven, the food that brings to all who believe in His death and resurrection eternal life. Jesus came to save you and I from falling prey to the devil and His kingdom of eternal condemnation that our sin brought us to. He came to save us out of the devil's jaws and put us firmly and safely back in His sheepfold where by faith we confess Him as our one true Shepherd, Our Lord and Savior.

The Work of the Church Seeking the Lost Sheep

Our Good Shepherd, His work of saving the lost sheep complete, has returned to His place at the Heavenly Father's side. But the work of going after the lost sheep still goes on. As promised in **Ezekiel 34:15-16** **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.** The LORD is still active in this work. He is doing through means, and the means He uses is you and I, the Church. He sends us out as the Church into the world to help bind up the injured, strengthen the weak, seek the lost, and bring back those straying. As the Church we are doing this through our work with the Flint Mission Network. The Spirit is at work through us to provide help for the body, and through our Gospel witness, the soul too.

But we are also called to do this in each of our lives as individuals through the divine appointments our Lord sets up for us. These happen when we encounter people as we go about our daily lives, and strike up a conversation with that can lead to the sharing our faith.

It can happen when you least expect it. Friday night as I was leaving the bonfire, we had I stopped to invite a father who was playing basketball with his son on the playground to join us for hot dogs and snacks. Before I really knew what was going on we were having a conversation about faith. When He heard that we are a Lutheran Church he shared that he grew up going to school at St. Paul. He described how he has strayed from the faith, but had been thinking that he and his son needed to return to Church. We talked about what we believe and confess, and he said that he was more comfortable with our beliefs than many of the other churches. What will happen with that? I don't know. I gave him some of the information that is on the table across from my office and left it in the hand of the LORD.

Then yesterday as I was walking out of the drug store, I saw a man walking in carrying a little dog. I smiled and greeted him. He smiled back. He looked like someone that belonged on Duck Dynasty with the long flowing beard and plenty of tattoos. He told me that they let him bring his doggy into the drug store and that everyone loved him. He said that little doggy is all he has left to remember his wife by who passed away earlier this year. He said that dog was a blessing and a gift. I asked him if he knew who really gave him that dog as His gift of love and he answered "My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ". He told me he used to go to Bible Study at another Church until they told him he could no longer bring his doggy with him. I invited both he and his little doggy to our Wednesday Evening Bible Study at 7:00 PM and gave him my card. He said he was interested in coming. What will become of this? Only the Holy Spirit knows, and He is really the One who calls back the straying and the lost.

He calls out to the lost through us. He wants us to invite them to join us for worship and or for fellowship events. And when He does move them to come through our doors we need to make sure we don't act like Ezekiel's shepherds did and thrust them away because they are not one of us, don't look like us; that we don't act like the church that pushed away that young man who was trying to return. It's important that we see each and every person as a precious lost lamb from the flock of God, one that Jesus would leave the ninety-nine to bring back them back to Him.

Conclusion

Even though the sheep of the flock, where that young man I told you about grew, shoved him aside, the Holy Spirit wasn't done calling this man and his family back into the sheepfold. He was moved for purely secular reasons to enroll his oldest child in a nearby Lutheran kindergarten program. The only catch was that he could only afford it with the discount they gave to those who regularly attended worship. So, he attended a worship service. He looked far different than most of the other worshipers, with his long hair and earring, sporting a motorcycle jacket. And there were more than a few sideways glances. But two members of that congregation started up a conversation with him after worship was over. And that moved him to come back again the next Sunday. And that was when the Good Shepherd working through the Gospel, through the means of grace, called him back into the fold. There were more than a few that thought this guy would never amount to much. But the Good Shepherd had plans for him regarding the shepherding his sheep. That man went on to become a pastor. And that young man is me.

Jesus came to be the Good Shepherd who seeks and saves the lost, one soul at a time. And every soul is important to Him, your soul and mine. He comes through the means of grace to call back the lost, to call the unchurched, as well as those who used to be members but have strayed away. He does this through means, and the means He uses is you and me. He wants us to invite them to join us for Bible Study, for worship, so that they can be exposed to His powerful work through the Gospel, through the means of grace. He wants to use us to call the lost into His sheepfold where He will protect them, along with us, for the eternal pasture that is to come in the Resurrection on the Last Day. Lord God, use us as willing shepherds to call out to the lost so that you can work the miracle of faith in them, just as you did in my life and the lives of all here who believe. Amen.