

St Mark's Lutheran Church
Last Sunday
Ezekiel 34:11-24
Pastor Ben Pfeiffer

Greeting

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. 'Many are the plans in the human heart but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails' (Proverbs 19:21). This week we have been in the process of changing plans, then changing them again and again and again, to try and keep up with the changing restrictions, due to the Coronavirus outbreak north of Adelaide. What a powerful reminder that our plans and purposes are in God's hands and not our own, and that his word and promises are the only sure foundation upon which we build. So let's allow God's word and purpose to be at work in us today, as we pray.

Introduction

As a child I remember watching my grandfather work with sheep; the tailing, crutching, feeding, branding and especially the process of preparing them for shearing. I would be swinging on the top bar of the large, rusted, race fence, as he and Rover brought them in. I would be marvelling at the whole process, somewhat bemused that a dog was a far more useful part of it than I was!

There were many things I didn't quite understand. Like how Grandpa was able to count these sheep as they shuffled and ran and crammed through that race. Like how Grandpa was able to distinguish those sheep from one another and occasionally swing open a side gate and nudge one through. Or like how some of those sheep would occasionally jump over a seemingly invisible fence and usually stick the landing but not always, much to amusement of us onlookers. There was a lot I didn't know or understand about grandpa's work as a sheep farmer but I loved to watch it and learn about it and feel some small part of it.

The image of God as our farmer, our shepherd, our Good Shepherd, is very common throughout the Bible, including this week on the Last Sunday of the church year. And as we have found ourselves scattered one again, separated, distanced from one another, we can be thankful that we are not sheep without a shepherd. We know who our shepherd is and even more importantly our shepherd knows who we are. He knows us by name.

The Shepherd who Seeks

One thing that stands out about this reading from Ezekiel is who initiates the action. You can trace the first person pronouns through the text and they are as common as white on rice, or white on sheep, for that matter. *“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.”* Then...

I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered...

I will bring them out from the nations...

I will bring them into their own land...

I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel...

I will tend them in a good pasture...

I myself will tend my sheep...

I will search for the lost and bring back the strays...

I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak...

I will shepherd the flock with justice...

I will judge between one sheep and another...

I will save my flock...

I will place over them one shepherd...

I the LORD will be their God...

I the LORD have spoken

That's sixteen 'I statements' in the text and I left a few out because they get repetitious! Israel was in exile, scattered abroad, and God was detailing his purposes to them, his planned search and rescue mission to restore them as a nation once more. Lost sheep are a real problem. Sheep separated from the flock lose whatever small natural defence mechanism they have. They become largely unprotected from predators and every cliff and ravine and thorn bush and spot of bad weather becomes a threat to their wellbeing. *'I will search for the lost and bring back the strays,'* God assures them (v. 16). Their time of being scattered would not last long.

The Shepherd who Judges

Yet, God's seeking and presence is not always a happy thought for the sheep. The Shepherd promises judgment and justice to the sleek and strong, to the self-interested and self-important, to those who have trampled down the pasture and muddied the waters for the rest of the flock. He is

not pleased to see us thinking only of ourselves and living without regard for the more vulnerable members of the flock.

The Gospel reading for today is the separation of the sheep and goats, in which the return of the Son of Man results in honour and joy for some and dishonour for others. Those who lived with regard for the Son of Man, which results in regard for the less fortunate, are welcomed into his kingdom, whereas those who lived without regard for the Son of Man, nor for the less fortunate, are not welcomed. We find these passages unsettling and rightly so.

The image of the shepherd or sheep farmer is again helpful. My grandpa distinguished sheep. He had too. Some were healthy. Some were not. Some were ready. Some were not. Some were his. Some were not. I had very little idea what the distinguishing marks were or how he knew them so well, but he did. So some went in to be sheared and some stayed out. I didn't ask why. It didn't matter that I knew why, only that he did. My part was to trust his judgment.

The Shepherd who Saves

What I knew of my grandfather was that he loved and cared about those sheep. He poured his heart and soul into them. He would do everything possible to save them from a bad fate. We have a shepherd who is every bit as kind and gracious to us as he was, and then some. He says, *"I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered... I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them... I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken."*

The final prophecy and purpose here is of a God who will send another shepherd, a servant shepherd, an under shepherd, a shepherd prince, to not just be over his flock but among them. And so Christ came, living and breathing, and experiencing the joys and disappointments of life in this world just like we do. A loyal leader. A victim of injustice. A Good Shepherd. The one who lays down his life for his sheep.

We can stand in the judgment, because we stand with him. We can stand in the midst of the Coronavirus, because we stand with him. We can stand up against injustice, because we stand with him. We can stand with least of these brothers and sisters, because in them, we meet him. We can stand and hold our heads high, despite the sin and self-interest we too have displayed, knowing that our forgiveness and hope is found in nothing and no one else, than him, our Good Shepherd.