

## ***“Shepherding the Sheep”***

Do you ever get to the point where you need to just ignore social media and stop listening to the news – because it’s just too depressing? The same thing is true in the church. If you spend too much time watching what’s going on – or you are too close to the workings of the church – it can be depressing.

Listen to the church news and it seems to be in shambles – statistically, morally, and theologically. Abusive priests – the membership of mainline Christian denominations in a free fall – and all sorts of nonsense and wickedness associated with the name of Christ --- is troubling, to say the least.

Leaders fear that the church is on the verge of becoming “irrelevant” in our society. The persecution of Christians is “less subtle” day by day. The church’s voice concerning the traditional family, and other biblical teachings, is scoffed at – and the church is told to “mind your own business.”

It seems we live in hopeless times – not all that different than for Israel in the days of Ezekiel the prophet. The Lord had promised that He would establish “David’s Son” upon His throne, and that His reign would be from everlasting to everlasting – but now, David’s son, his descendant, King Jehoiachin, has been taken into Babylonian captivity with the rest of the Israelites.

Their salvation, and their survival, was dependent on this promise of “David’s Son” – but now, scattered into a foreign land, living in exile – it all seemed so hopeless.

The church in the days of Ezekiel was in shambles. It was not just the persecution from the world – enemies attacking from the outside – but as the Lord says through His prophet – it was the unfaithful shepherds in the church that were scattering the sheep.

In the verses prior to our text, we learn that these shepherds had been feeding themselves and not the sheep. “The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.”

The sheep of God's flock had been scattered, "because there was no shepherd" – and they became "food for all the wild beasts."

That sounds like the church today. The sheep of God's flock have been scattered. Your family members have strayed. Congregational members "thrust with their horns" and the weak leave. Lutherans rarely "dare to be Lutheran" – and Christianity as a whole is persecuted and mocked.

The words the Lord speaks to Israel – He speaks to us who are living in these last days. "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 the places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness."

The "day of clouds and thick darkness" in Ezekiel's day was when Jerusalem fell at the hands of the Babylonians, and God's sheep are scattered into exile. In the year 70 A.D. Jerusalem would be invaded again, and be destroyed by the Roman armies – and God's sheep would flee. Throughout the Book of Acts the church is persecuted, and the flock is scattered.

All of this language of the "day of clouds and thick darkness" makes us think of the Last Day – when Christ will return. But on that day, the Lord promises that He will GATHER His scattered flock.

There is another "day of clouds and thick darkness" that we cannot overlook – a day that we call GOOD – Good Friday. That is the day of rescue for scattered sinners. That is when the Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep – when Jesus was lifted up on the cross in order to draw all men to Himself – so that all might be redeemed in His blood.

"I Myself will be the shepherd of My sheep," the Lord promises. Your rescue, your redemption, your salvation is not dependent on anyone else – for God Himself with shepherd His people. "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 ...", declares the Lord.

What the Lord Himself will do on the Last Day – He is already doing now, in and through His Church – even if it seems hopeless in our eyes. We hope for the return of our children – we long to see former congregational members – we yearn for a bold church that confesses all of God’s truth – and we desperately need to be protected from the persecution of the world --- and already, the Lord is doing what He promises.

Let me put it another way. Your children’s salvation is not dependent upon you – the redemption of the sheep of Immanuel is not dependent upon me (or any pastor) – and the survival of the Church is not contingent upon getting the right people elected (not in Seward, or St. Louis, or in the governments of the world).

What the Lord promises – He does. And what He is doing in these days – will be seen on the Last Day. Already He has given us “David’s Son” to shepherd us – our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. He has not abandoned us to fend for ourselves until the Last Day – but He is present and active through His Church today – shepherding His sheep.

The voice of the Good Shepherd rings out as His Word is preached and taught – from the pulpit, in Sunday School classrooms, and at your dinner tables and bedsides. The voice of the Good Shepherd calls out – through the mouths of His people – to gather His scattered sheep in the refuge of His sheepfold, the Church.

Jesus, “David’s Son,” gathers us and makes us to lie down in the green pastures of His Church – binding up our sin-inflicted wounds with the balm of His forgiveness – feeding us with Bread from heaven, His own Body and Blood – strengthening us to live amongst the persecutions of these days.

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

As it will be on the Last Day – so it is now, and ever shall be – in Christ, who shepherds us all our days. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.