

Sermon Notes for 9/11/16 (Pentecost 17)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Ezekiel 34:11-24

Theme: GOOD NEWS FOR THE WEAK AND WANDERING

The Point: Our Lord proves Himself to be the faithful Shepherd of His sheep in every age and every situation, whether we recognize it or not.

Introduction: Lost or missing children bring headlines. We are familiar with the “Amber alerts” that try to make a child’s abduction or disappearance known throughout the community, so that people can help to find that child. We are told that the first 24-48 hours after a person has gone missing can be the most critical time for recovering them. Recently our area has been blanketed with the coverage of the tragic death of Jacob Wetterling, who had been missing for nearly thirty years until his killer finally led police to the grave where he had buried eleven-year-old Jacob after murdering him. As parents and other family and friends grieve over the absence of a child, to a much greater extent our Lord God grieves over those who wander from their spiritual home. Our Lord’s love for His human creatures is unmatched, and He does whatever is required to bring them back into His fellowship.

Today’s Old Testament lesson spells this out quite clearly. It brings GOOD NEWS FOR THE WEAK AND WANDERING. The first part of Ezekiel 34 (which we didn’t hear today) speaks to the false shepherds, those priests and leaders of Israel who had been faithless in their responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the people. God pledges to take away those false and worthless shepherds, whose only interest was in fattening themselves at the expense of the sheep. They did not seek the straying or feed the hungry or care for the injured. So they will be kicked out of that responsibility. But then God also speaks most comfortingly and assuringly and hopefully to the sheep who had been fleeced by these false leaders. He promises them the most compassionate and caring shepherd of all.

For He says in today’s text, “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.” If the human leaders and shepherds would not do what God had committed to them, He would carry it out under His own steam. This He fulfilled most clearly and finally and fully in sending His Son. In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus tells the story of the one sheep out of a hundred who had gotten lost. The Good Shepherd did everything within his power to return that sheep to the fold. He wandered through the wilderness until he found that sheep, then put it onto his own shoulders to return to the safety and security of the fold.

It is not only children or the disabled or the elderly or the criminal element who are weak and wandering. No, in a very real sense, every one of us finds ourselves in that position on a regular basis. Sin rises up and bites us day after day. That is one of the reasons that confession is part and parcel of our worship experience. We foul up over and over. We seem to have a good footing right before we slip and fall badly. We imagine that we have conquered that particular habit that jumps up and overpowers us again. We think our family has gotten through the worst, just before our own weaknesses imperil the family one more time. Whether it is personal or corporate greed or anger or lust or addiction, we have been weak and have wandered from our Father’s home.

When we need help, where do we turn? To the talk show hosts who promise answers? To the psychologists who bring us face to face with our past? To the teachers whose learning has too often surpassed their wisdom? To the politicians who promise us all sorts of good things with no idea how to manage those promises or to effect their fulfillment?

In August, the Lutheran Hour featured an archived sermon by Rev. Oswald Hoffmann, one of the earlier Lutheran Hour speakers. His theme was “Hope Not in Politicians.” I thought it was quite a timely message. Let me share a part of that message with you: “It is easy to see how people get so excited about the election or defeat of a political candidate. Politicians seem to stand at the center of things. Their decisions and actions alter the course of history. They exercise power; and power is an enormously fascinating thing in this world of ours. When an election is over, some people are in ecstasy and others are down in the dumps. For some, their dreams seem to be on the way to accomplishment, and for others, their hopes have been blasted. It is just as if everything depends on the politician; it’s as if he or she has the whole world in his or her power. Politicians, they know better than that, or at least they should.

“People ought to know better than that, too. Nobody has got the whole world in his power, except One. Once in a while we have to be reminded of this fact, as the Psalmist reminded his people. He said it this way: ‘It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes.’ Politicians are the princes of our day. They are not all bad, and they are not all good. They are just like the rest of us. Because they are just like the rest of us, the Psalmist said: ‘it is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in politicians.’ A change of administration, a new lineup of politicians, is not going to solve the problems of the world. Politicians can do nothing when people have lost their sense of purpose, and their sense of destiny. Politicians can’t do anything about the problems of the world when people regard their purpose as simply the acquisition of things until they die or look upon their destiny as in the control of others for their own selfish purpose. When people become irresponsible, politicians are going to be irresponsible too. When people act like animals crowding one another away from the feeding trough of an advanced technology, politicians are going to go along with the whole process. The end of that process, according to the Scripture, is death.” (Thus far Dr. Hoffmann’s words. . .)

He is right, isn’t he? Politicians, no matter how gifted, able, and faithful, are not going to provide the ultimate leadership that we need to bring us peace and hope and joy. That comes from another source, an otherworldly spring. Thank God that He has not deserted us and left us to the politicians as our final hope and our salvation. Maybe you had hoped that, with the barren desert of candidates in both major parties this year, perhaps the Libertarian would carry the ball. Then he admits that he doesn’t even know what Aleppo is.

You can trust many people for certain things. On this anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, we think especially of the first responders who put their lives on the line for others. But don’t put your ultimate trust in people. Don’t trust in politicians. You have a worthy Lord instead. God Himself promises to shepherd you through your times of trouble and disaster. If you think you are irretrievably lost, He assures you, “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed.” If you are experiencing hurts that seem never likely to heal, He speaks these kindly words: “I will bind up the injured.” If age or disease or other burdens are causing you to know your weakness all too personally, our Lord promises, “I will strengthen the weak.”

And He does just that. You can testify to it as well as I can, I am sure. I have tasted His goodness over and over again. This past couple months, my experience of surgery and the healing that is following it have brought additional signs of God’s grace. I have tasted that grace as people have cared for me and prayed for me and carried the burdens that I could not bear at the time. The body and blood of Christ have surged through my body and spirit in a healing flood. The word of comfort and forgiveness have reminded me that, no matter what troubles I go through in this life, there is a world of final, complete, and enduring wholeness, joy, and peace that await me and all who live in the Savior. In that world all the weak knees and the frail ankles will jump for joy! God indeed strengthens the weak. One day, you see, the weakness and the wandering will all be in the past, and nothing will hinder our fellowship with the Lord who has loved us even before we took our first breath in this world.

God has said, "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." Of course, the Prince of whom God spoke, the one who appeared from the house of David, who occupied the throne of his father David, that Prince is the one whom we call Jesus. He is the one who alone could say, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I know my own and my own know me."

Selfish and egotistical shepherds take no care for the sheep. They are concerned only about their own welfare and their own prosperity. But Jesus came with the one very specific purpose in mind, namely to lay down His life for the sake of the weak and wandering sheep. Nothing could dissuade Him from that purpose, no matter how much wealth or power Satan might offer Him. He would walk according to the Father's will, no matter what it cost Him. And it did cost Him everything, every sorrow, every suffering, every breath, to the very end, when He could say, "It is finished!"

Knowing the Shepherd is the most critical learning that any of us could ever have. John Kenneth Galbraith, in his autobiography, *A Life in Our Times*, illustrates the devotion of his family's housekeeper: "It had been a wearying day, and I asked Emily to hold all telephone calls while I had a nap. Shortly thereafter the phone rang. President Lyndon Johnson was calling from the White House. 'Get me Ken Galbraith. This is Lyndon Johnson.' 'He is sleeping, Mr. President. He said not to disturb him.' 'Well, wake him up. I want to talk to him.' 'No, Mr. President. I work for him, not you.' When I called the President back [Galbraith wrote], he could scarcely control his pleasure: "Tell that woman I want her here in the White House." The president knew how rare that person who is absolutely assured about who is the authority and whom to obey. Our Lord wants you to know Him – to recognize His voice and to follow that voice, not the many other voices that try to claim your authority.

Conclusion: Our Lord proves Himself to be the faithful Shepherd of His sheep in every age and every situation, whether we recognize it or not, whether we acknowledge Him or not, whether we want Him or not. He did not first ask how you would respond before He bowed His back to the torturers and offered His hands and feet to those who nailed Him to the cross. He carried out His shepherding care for you and now offers to you the joy of knowing that all your cares are in His loving hands. Whether you are feeling weak and need His strength or you are feeling lost and wandering and need His presence, this Shepherd will take care of you today and every day as you make your way through this dark shadowed valley to the bright heavenly sunshine. Now "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."