

Muddy Feet and Cold Shoulders

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Most Christians know and dearly love the 23rd Psalm – the one that speaks of the Lord as the Good Shepherd – the Good Shepherd who leads his flock to green pastures and quiet waters where they can be fed and nourished, and whose rod and staff are their comfort as he leads them safely even through the valley of the shadow of death. It's a beautiful image: this portrait of the Lord as our ever-watchful shepherd and we, his sheep, living out our lives under his loving care and constant protection. It's a description that appears in several other places throughout the Scripture – not just the 23rd Psalm; and perhaps the fullest extension of the idea is found in the 34th chapter of Ezekiel, a portion of which we heard as today's Old Testament lesson.

I say "a portion" because as you can see (for reasons I don't quite understand) the folks who put together the lectionary decided to skip the first 10 verses of the chapter, which contains more of this shepherd imagery. In the section that's missing, the Lord directs the Prophet Ezekiel to speak his divine judgments against the lousy shepherds of Israel, by which he means the religious and political leaders who have failed in their duty and led his people astray. Specifically, on the religious side of the house, the priests and prophets were freely mixing elements of pagan Canaanite religion with the one true faith taught in God's Word. They set up altars to false gods in various places throughout the land, and offered sacrifices to them. They even went so far set up idols of these gods in the Lord's own temple. And there was more: they directed people to worship the sun, moon, and stars; they led them in ritual prostitution; they practiced all sorts of pagan divination by which they supposedly told fortunes and communicated with the spirits of the dead; and they introduced human sacrifices, telling people to cast their infant children onto beds of burning coals as offerings to satisfy the bloodthirsty idol gods. And mind you, they did all this while claiming (and I suppose believing themselves) to be faithful to the one true God. They weren't.

On the political side, the leadership of Israel, the king, his advisors, and the other leading nobles, were allowing themselves to be influenced by human philosophies of government and worldly strategies concerning national security. Instead of trusting the Lord to defend them from their enemies, as he promised he would, they thought they were safer playing the game of making and breaking alliances with the surrounding nations depending on which seemed to be the strongest at any given moment. Though the Lord consistently warned them against such alliances with foreign nations, telling them, in effect, if you play with these sorts of deadly snakes eventually they're going to bite you, they refused to listen. They trusted in their own wisdom and political acumen far more than in the Lord.

So both the religious and political shepherds of Israel were doing a botch job. They were leading the people over whom the Lord placed them to ruin – physically and spiritually. And that's what happened. Ruin came upon them. The snakes bit hard and God's people came under the oppression of ruthless foreign powers. And worse, the people lost the true knowledge of the Lord. Thus they were scattered in the darkness and made vulnerable to attacks by predators: the wolves of this world that destroyed and fed on their bodies, and the devil who, roaring like a lion, was waiting to take their souls.

It's in response to this tragic situation that the Lord promises to intervene. That's where today's text begins, with the Lord saying that he himself will search out his lost sheep and

rescue them from the perils they've been exposed to. He will gather them again, bind up their wounds, and bring them to the rich pastures and grassy hillsides of Israel. There they will thrive again under his care. All the disasters caused by the bad shepherds were going to be undone by the Lord, the Good Shepherd.

And this happened. In the immediate context, the Lord is speaking about his bringing the exiles back from the Babylonian Captivity in the sixth century BC, and the reestablishment of the nation of Judah as an independent nation after it had ceased to exist for about 70 years. That's history now. Prophetically, however, these declarations of the Lord were looking ahead to the time of Christ. Then, again, God's people were being led by bad shepherds, particularly in a religious sense. The scribes and Pharisees had twisted the true faith once restored into a complex legal code. They taught that the assurance of salvation came only by careful adherence to the letter of the Mosaic Law and not by relying on the grace of God who forgives the sins of those who trust in his mercy. The result was spiritual starvation for God's people. They were left in fear and doubt, burdened by the impossibly heavy load of the Law. They were scattered, weak, and easy prey for the devil. Souls were dying; they were being lost forever.

Thus Christ the Good Shepherd came to rescue his sheep. He taught them the truth of God's love, and showed that love by laying down his life for them – his life a ransom payment for their sins. Then rising again, he gathered the flock of God into a new fold, his holy Church, where he continues to feed and care for his sheep through his Word and Sacraments.

But the thing to see is there are always bad shepherds who lead God's people astray, and the Lord still comes to deliver his lost lambs. A great example is what happened at the time of the Reformation. Then again the flock of God was being taught by rotten, greedy, self-serving shepherds to trust in their supposed good works rather than in the saving work of Jesus on the cross. The Gospel was all but lost. And again the Lord intervened. Through the reformers and the Word they proclaimed, the Lord himself restored the truth by which people are saved. And it keeps going on today. So many people in churches that call themselves "Christian" are being taught by bad shepherds to place their trust and hope for salvation in things other than Jesus and his saving work on the cross. These bad shepherds, either because they are deceived themselves or because they want to fleece the flock, are leading souls to ruin. But when the sheep find themselves broken, weighed down, and wounded – when they are left in despair – one at a time the Lord delivers them. Through the ministry of his true Church, the saving Word of the Gospel is still being proclaimed. Christ's sacraments are still being rightly administered. And through these means the Lord is even now gathering his lost sheep and bringing them under his care.

It's impossible to overstate the damage done to God's sheep by unfaithful shepherds. Likewise, it's impossible to describe the overwhelming relief and joy experienced by the Lord's lambs when they are delivered by him from systems of false teaching and spiritual tyranny, and they come to trust in the true Gospel: God's grace and forgiveness offered freely through faith alone in Jesus Christ and his atonement for sin.

But bad shepherds are not the only threat to the people whom God calls and gathers to himself in his Church. Even where the shepherds are faithful, even in congregations where it's truly the Good Shepherd whose voice is heard and whose Word is rightly divided and proclaimed, untold damage can be done to God's precious lambs – not by wolves or lions or by other predators out there in the world; but sadly by the other sheep in their own folds. This is the main thrust of the second half of today's text from Ezekiel. There the Lord speaks his judgments against the stronger sheep and rams, who hog the good pasture for themselves and

who drink the clean water upstream, while shoving the weaker lambs out of the way with their horns and shoulders, and trampling with their muddy feet the grass the weaker ones must eat, and while they stand in the stream stirring up muck from the bottom so the weaker ones downstream are left with nothing but polluted water to drink. He's speaking of the terrible harm the sheep do each other – especially to the most vulnerable – by their selfish ways and unloving hearts.

What's in mind here? Let me give you a few examples. First is the matter of sitting in judgment of others. You come here to the church, you confess your sins, you say that you're a poor miserable sinner deserving of nothing but God's wrath and condemnation, and you plead for God's mercy in Christ. And you receive it. The Word of absolution is declared. Christ forgives you all your sins ... and yet ... and yet you deny that same forgiveness to others. Their sins are bigger and worse than yours, you think—especially the ones they committed against you. Maybe you judge them to be insufficiently sorry for their sins. "Why, if they were really sorry they'd show it by" doing whatever you think it is they ought to do to prove their penitence". Maybe they're just not as good a Christian as you. They don't show up as often. They don't contribute as much of their time and treasure to the church as you think they should. And so you let them know it. Oh, you might not say it in so many words; but with your critical looks and cold shoulder, you make sure they feel your disapproval. You make them aware that you hold them in disdain. You make them feel as if they're not worthy of receiving Christ's forgiveness – effectively shoving them out of the way and leaving them with trampled grass and spoiled water.

Or how about that spirit of factionalism that so often infects the sheep of God's flock? It's that "us against them" mentality that usually starts over something really simple and silly, like a dispute over the color of the carpet in the social hall; but then it mushrooms out of control and spills over into every facet of our life together in the church. Then all of a sudden we imagine that we can read the minds and determine the evil motives of our opponents – always imagining the worse of them, of course – while we ourselves are beyond reproach in the matters that are in dispute. How many of God's lambs are driven from the flock by such needless controversies? And how many others are caught in the crossfire, left wounded as collateral damage?

Then there's lack of hospitality. You know, one of the hardest things in the world is to walk in as a stranger to a new church. Take a person who has been severely injured in spirit by the legalistic teachings of modern American Evangelicalism. They were told that the Gospel of Jesus Christ – his death for their sins – got them in the door; but to be a true Christian was all about obedience to the Law. It isn't enough that Jesus is your Savior; no, you have to make him the Lord of your life, by which they meant total commitment and complete obedience. But they found they couldn't do it. Try as they might, they couldn't live that perfect Christian life (which no one can if it means perfect obedience rather than trust in Christ). And so they're left feeling crushed and hopeless. But now that person steps into a church where the Word of God is rightly proclaimed – where they really can hear the pure Gospel; but it's all so different than what they're used to. There's a sense of reverence in the worship they've never seen, and they are unfamiliar with the rites and rituals. And so, they're already feeling self-conscious and awkward in this new environment. But what happens now when the people standing around them in worship – who can clearly see that the visitor is lost and doesn't know what's going on – gawk and snicker at them instead of befriending and helping them. Or perhaps they just ignore them. Or maybe they judge them because they don't measure up to a certain dress code. Whatever. It doesn't take much for such a wounded soul to feel unwelcome. They leave and they don't come back.

And sometimes it's just pure thoughtlessness. True story: I know of a certain Lutheran church in a major metropolitan area out west where one day a visitor showed up to worship. She was a middle aged woman, and so she was approached by a female member of the congregation who was roughly of the same age. She welcomed the visitor and said how glad she was that she'd come; but then immediately began saying things that would make the typical visitor sorry they made the mistake of coming in. Though it was probably well intentioned, the member apologized for their new pastor, who she said was young, inexperienced, and whose sermons were much too long and boring – and this is before the worship service. I guess she meant to prepare the visitor for the worse. On a positive note she did say there was some hope that he'd get better over time. She had no such hope, however, for the pastor's wife who was unlike the previous pastor's wife, who played the organ and participated in all kinds of other church activities. No, in her estimation the new pastor's wife didn't do anything right. She didn't know how to properly dress, keep house, or control her three young children. She had much more to say on these subjects, and did.

Now, honestly, if you were visiting a new church, would you be encouraged to stay if you heard all that? And I'm not sure which would be the greater turn off: the alleged problems with the pastor and his family, or the fact that there were people who were judging them so harshly. But now here's the kicker. There is some justice in this story. It turns out the visitor was the mother of the new pastor's wife. Ouch. How do you think the member felt when she heard that?

Guilty, I hope; guilty and ashamed of being unthinking and loveless and judgmental at very least. But now here's the point: there are times when we are all the same way. With our cold shoulders and muddy feet we make it harder for other people to hear and to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is a sin the Lord takes very seriously because it wounds and drives away his lambs – the lean lambs that are the weakest and most vulnerable. It's his will that none be lost, which is why he says he will judge between his sheep; and specifically that he will bring into judgment the fat sheep who harm the others that belong to him.

In this light we are all called to examine ourselves today: to see where we have sinned in this regard; and to once again to confess our many faults and plead our unworthiness. And when we do we too will receive the Word of forgiveness of the Good Shepherd, who today feeds us with his very body and blood given and shed for our sin. Strengthened and reassured by him we can then rise to care for and love each other as fellow members of his flock, even as he has loved us. God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!