**4th Sunday of Easter – Good Shepherd Sunday – April 21, 2013 – Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Ezekiel 34:25-31 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**“The rule of the Good Shepherd brings blessings to his sheep”**

***25*** *" 'I will make a covenant* *of peace* *with them and rid the land of wild beasts* *so that they may live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety.****26*** *I will bless* *them and the places surrounding my hill.* *I will send down showers in season;* *there will be showers of blessing.****27*** *The trees of the field will yield their fruit* *and the ground will yield its crops;* *the people will be secure* *in their land. They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke* *and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them.****28*** *They will no longer be plundered by the nations, nor will wild animals devour them. They will live in safety,* *and no one will make them afraid.****29*** *I will provide for them a land renowned* *for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine* *in the land or bear the scorn* *of the nations.****30*** *Then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Sovereign LORD.****31*** *You my sheep,* *the sheep of my pasture,* *are people, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD.' "*

Are you a sheep, a wolf or a sheepdog? In a paper written by LTC Dave Grossman of the US Army, he writes that there are these three kinds of people in society. LTC Grossman believes that most people are sheep. Most people are kind and are not capable of hurting each other except by accident or extreme provocation. Then there are the wolves who feed on the sheep without mercy. These are evil men and women who have a capacity for violence and no love for their fellow citizens. Then, Grossman asks, “What if you have a capacity for violence, and a deep love for your fellow citizens? What do you have then? A sheepdog, a warrior, someone who is walking the hero's path. Someone who can walk into the heart of darkness, into the universal human phobia, and walk out unscathed.”

<http://warriorofsuccess.com/on-sheep-wolves-and-sheepdogs-dave-grossman.htm>

The Bible speaks the same way. There are sheep, wolves, and a third category: not sheepdogs, but shepherds. Which one are you? The prophet Isaiah confesses for all of us when he says, **“We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.”** (Isaiah 53:6) In our lesson the LORD speaking through the prophet Ezekiel writes, **“You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God.”** And there are wolves out there. Jesus called false prophets “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” (Matthew 7:15) He also spoke of shepherds, Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd.” (John 10:14)

In our lesson this morning we will explore chapter 34 of Ezekiel. We’ll see that we are sheep, there are wolves out there who seek to harm us, but Jesus is our Good Shepherd, and under the rule of the Good Shepherd, he brings blessings to his sheep.

Our lesson is from Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel lived 570 years before Jesus was born. He spent his ministry among Israelites in exile in Babylon, several hundred miles away from Jerusalem, which is modern day Iraq and Iran. Remember that the LORD sent the Babylonian army to destroy the cities of Judea, particularly Jerusalem, the temple, and deport the citizens of Judea to Babylon. There they lived in exile for 70 years. God did this to discipline his people. They had turned their backs on the LORD and worshiped false gods. He had explicitly said, “Worship the LORD your God and serve him only.” (Deuteronomy 12)

Before any of this happened the nation of Judea and Israel had already suffered. They were oppressed by nations on their borders. Bands of raiders plundered their cities, stole their livestock and crops from their fields. Wild animals roamed the country sides. There was famine. God had warned them before they marched into the Promised Land under Joshua, “If you obey my commands, I will send rains, your crops will flourish, you will have peace from your enemies. But if you do not listen to me and follow my commands, there will be no peace or security. I will punish you with famine, wild animals, you will be oppressed and enslaved.” (Deuteronomy 29) And now they found them enslaved by the Babylonians. Yes, “We all like sheep have gone astray…”

The LORD made a promise to them in spite of their disobedience. A Shepherd would come and rule and bring blessings for his flock. Ezekiel used language that was easy for the people to understand. The people in his day made a living as ranchers and farmers. For them ideal conditions included absence of wild animals to attack their flocks and shepherds; rain in seasons so the land would be productive; fields and orchards free from attackers who would steal their harvest; no domination by foreign power; no longer slaves, but live in safety, no longer be afraid… ever.

This is the same promise that he makes to you and me today. Since God the Father sent Jesus to be our Shepherd King, he has promised us peace and security and prosperity.

If that is what life is like under the rule of the Good Shepherd why is there fear? Why do wild animals roam our streets? The wolves in sheep’s clothing, as Jesus once said, the false teachers. They promise that if we follow God’s Word, life will prosper. But it doesn’t always. False teachers abandon God’s good plan for marriage. They preach that God did not create the world in six days, or that Jesus is not the only way to heaven. We run around trying to protect our children and ourselves from these harmful false teachings, which threaten to tear our faith apart. It’s a lot of work building up the defense bunker of Christian education through personal Bible study, Sunday school, catechism.

Then there are the wolves who intend to cause us physical harm, who brazenly murder innocent people with acts of terrorism. Wolves prey on innocent children in our schools. Wolves daily attack our men and women in uniform overseas. We run around trying to secure our homes with alarm systems, our schools with armed guards, our personal bodies with carry conceal permits. But are we ever really safe from the wolves?

Then there is the king of this jungle, the lion. The Bible talks about the lion who prowls around looking for some poor soul to devour; that’s Satan. Satan is always on the attack. He inflicts you with disease. He brings hardships and accident into your life. He tempts you to doubt the Good Shepherd, to doubt his love and power to protect you, to prove to you that because accidents happen, because you get sick, there is no security or peace under the rule of the Good Shepherd. How do we poor, helpless sheep defend ourselves against the lion?

Satan seeks to enslave us by fear. He reminds us daily that the collar of death is firmly clasped around our necks and its shackles are fastened around our ankles and that at any moment it could drag us down to the grave. Satan seeks to enslave us by the fear of the inevitable or what could or might happen, and we live in hopelessness and despair. Yes, we are sheep, harassed and attacked by wolves.

Because we are sinful sheep, sometimes we wander off. We forget to listen to the voice of our Good Shepherd. We find ourselves all alone, trembling with fear, cornered by a pack of wolves who wish to devour us. But Jesus is our Good Shepherd. Just as LTC Grossman said in his paper, there are some people who run into the chaos, who run into the danger to save the sheep. The Bible tells us that’s what our God, our Lord Jesus, has done for you and me.

He promises you, **“You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God,” declares the Sovereign LORD**. You know that you are Jesus’ little lamb, because he brought you into his flock through holy Baptism. By faith in Jesus’ promise, you know that he is your God. Because he is your Shepherd, he has promised to do something to rescue you from your fear.

In our lesson, God spoke through his prophet Ezekiel, “I will make a covenant, a promise of peace, and rid the land of wild beasts. I will send showers of blessing. The trees and plants will yield their crops. You will have bountiful harvests. No more will you be victim of famine. No nations will plunder you. They will no longer enslave you. You will live in safety. No one will make you afraid.”

He’s describing heaven. In heaven there will be no wolves, no lion to hunt us down and cause pain and suffering in our souls and bodies. In heaven there will be nothing to enslave us, no more death to threaten us, but peace and security and prosperity. The Apostle John was privileged to see all of this, in Revelation he described heaven, “**There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”** (Rev. 21.4) Your Good Shepherd guarantees that you will live in this place of peace because he has already defeated the wolves. He has crushed the lion. He has done everything so that we will not be afraid.

The first action he took was to lay down his life for his sheep. In his paper LTC Grossman described the sheepdog who is willing to run into danger to save the lives of others, without thinking about their own safety. We see that in people, like Pfc. Ross McGinnis, from Knox, Pennsylvania, who in 2006, was perched in the gunner's hatch of a Humvee in Iraq, when a grenade sailed past him and into the truck where four other soldiers sat. He jumped on the grenade and his body absorbed the blast. He died. But he saved the lives of four of his buddies in the vehicle. <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,357671,00.html#ixzz2QvptuTNc>

This is what Jesus did for you. The Good Shepherd stepped in front of us, his sheep, and allowed the wolves to attack him. He allowed the lion, Satan, to attack and devour him. He shielded us from the harm and destruction that would have come upon us because of our sins of fear and anxiety. He sacrificed himself for his sheep, so that we might live forever without fear of our sins, of Satan’s attacks, of death.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, defeated the wild animal of death, by dying, and then raising his dead body from his grave. Because our Good Shepherd lives today, he proves that he has defeated death. Death could not contain him in the grave. Because of his resurrection, our Good Shepherd proves that he will raise our bodies on the Last Day. He will take us to that place where there will be no more carry conceal permits, no more armed guards, no more home security systems, no more hospitals, no more funeral homes or cemeteries. You will never be afraid. No one will ever threaten you. There will always be peace because you will be with your Good Shepherd. We rejoice and thank God that he will lead us to that place where we will rest in green pastures and walk beside quiet waters.

But the question still remains, since the Good Shepherd has indeed defeated our enemies and stands victorious over them, then why does he allow disease and sickness, death and destruction, violence and sadness to affect his sheep? Where is this peace now? That’s not why Jesus came to earth. When the Shepherd King came to our world he lived in the land of Palestine. Their society did not change into some utopian paradise because Jesus walked the streets. Even if most of the Jews had believed in Jesus and lived in repentance and faith, perhaps there would have been less violence, less hatred. But it would not be a place of perfect peace and security. This world is filled with sin. And sin will always breed evil people. Sin will always give birth to disease and violence, war and death. Sin will always produce wild animals who seek to devour us and tear us to pieces.

But we have a shepherd. Shepherds run to the scene of chaos instead of running away, like the first responders at the Boston marathon, who ran toward the explosion at the finish line to tend to those who were wounded. That’s Jesus, our Good Shepherd, who runs to us when we are tempted to be afraid, when we are tempted to doubt, when we are tempted to despair and lose all hope, and he leads us beside the green pastures and still waters of his Word. In his Word and in his Sacrament his promises take away fear and doubt. In his Word and Sacrament his promises will give you hope and strength, because in the green pastures and quiet waters of his Word and Sacraments he proves to us again what he has done for us as our Good Shepherd. And so we will lounge in the green pastures of God’s Word, we will drink from the waters of his Lord’s Supper, from the waters of our Baptism every day, where he promises us, **“You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God.”**  That will never change.

Are you a sheep, a wolf or a sheepdog? By God’s grace we are all sheep, Jesus’ little lambs, and he is our Good Shepherd. With Jesus as our Good Shepherd, he will protect us and bring us safely home to the eternal sheep pen, where we will live in peace and safety forever and ever. To that end we pray, “Come quickly, Lord Jesus! Amen!”