**Ezekiel 34:11-17,23-24** November 22, 2020

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*Ezekiel 34:11This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. 13I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. 14I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. 16I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice…*

*23I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. 24I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Cleaning up after a storm—maybe it’s a guy thing—but cleaning up after a storm sounds like a, dare I say it, a fun challenge. There was a day this spring when our synod’s humanitarian aid committee sent out an invitation to a four-day volunteer clean-up crew. It was going to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to help recovery after a massive straight-line wind storm. I thought, “If I were retired, I’d be there in a heartbeat.” It would be fun to come in from the outside, to have clear-cut four-day goals, to walk away feeling like we have accomplished something meaningful and helped people, and then to return to life as usual.

We thank God for people who do that, who help. But the people who have to live it don’t get to return to life as usual. The day of storm, tornado, hurricane, the day of clouds and darkness, that was a bad day for them. Things will improve, but there will be scars.

Some years ago the pastor of our WELS church in New Orleans, Louisiana, sent out a Christmas letter. That Christmas letter was written for the Christmas after hurricane Katrina. You would expect that pastor’s Christmas letter to echo with the Lord’s blessings and resilient people rebuilding. It was more complex than that. It painted a picture of people blessed, but also challenged; rebuilding, but bereft; hopeful, yet anxious. And while this pastor and church members were extremely thankful for the volunteers, there were things that no army of volunteers could fix in a month or a year. When the house, the neighborhood is rebuilt and all the rubble and debris taken to who knows where, the memories of the days of clouds and darkness (both real and metaphorical) haunt people.

2020 is going to leave scars. Now, perhaps more than any time in our lives we appreciate today’s picture of our Savior in Ezekiel 34:

**Christ, King on a Day of Clouds and Darkness**

Ezekiel chapter 34 took place just after a disaster greater than any storm. People were, so to speak, walking the street dazed. They had walked to a grocery store and found themselves standing there staring at a foundation, not sure what to do next.

Let’s take stock of where the prophet Ezekiel and his people stood. (You’ll have to bear with me while I summarize a lot of Israelite history in a couple sentences.) Eight hundred years before Ezekiel, the Lord had planted the nation of Israel in the land called Canaan. About half way through that eight hundred years, Israel entered a political and religious golden age under Kings David and Solomon. Four hundred years later, that nation came to a crashing end through a series of foreign invasions. In one of the first invasions, Ezekiel, the prophet of our reading, then age 25, was taken to exile in Babylon. While he was in captivity, most Israelites were still living back in Canaan. The Jewish thought was, “The Lord God may be disciplining some of us, but he would never let his holy temple be desecrated. Jerusalem will stand.” Then the impossible happened. In the twelfth year of Ezekiel’s exile, a man escaped the Babylonian siege and reached the exiles with the word, “Jerusalem has fallen.” God’s city was destroyed. It was a bodyblow to the exiles. It was a 9/11 moment. Every Jew could remember exactly where they were when they heard the news. God had flipped the checkerboard on his cheating, rebellious people and they had no idea what to do next. For them, it was the day of ***“clouds and darkness.”*** That was the chapter before our reading.

Now God finally had their attention. Now they realized life could not possibly go on as normal. To such a people reeling from the annihilation of their homeland, to such a people reeling from divine judgment, God spoke the words of Ezekiel 34. ***“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. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness”*** (12).

God does care. He will again graciously rule Israel. God says that now he is going to search for his scattered sheep and restore them. He will gather and guard them.

God indicated that he would establish a new rule over his people, a new order. It would not be embodied in a king living in a palace in Jerusalem, but would be something better. ***“I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down… I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David”*** (15,23). This was 400 years after David died, so obviously God was not talking about old King David literally ruling over his people. Then who?

This is one of many funny things you have to get used when you listen to the Old Testament. The Old Testament had this way of pointing ancient believers to the future through past people and figures. Through the prophet Malachi, God said about another long-dead prophet, *“I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.”* (4:5) Jesus later explained that this prophesied Elijah was John the Baptist. Moses, the day of his death, said, *“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”* (Dt 18:15) Of course, Moses was prophesying the greatest “prophet” of all, Jesus. And here in our reading, the Lord hearkens back to good king David to tell the Israelites about a future David-like shepherd king. God is melding together the Israelites current and past experiences—what they knew—to tell them about the future which they did not yet know. That the David in our reading refers to Jesus was later made clear 600 years after Ezekiel by an angel who said to the mother of our Lord, *“You will be with child… The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign…forever.”* (Lk 1:31-33).

Ezekiel’s somewhat hazy prophecy of a new sort of shepherd-king, is the one we stake our faith in. He is Christ our King. But he does not execute his royal duties like a self-important king. Instead he acts as a caring, self-sacrificing shepherd. He is happiest when his sheep are content. Sort of like how you get this nice, warm, happy feeling when you see your dog sleeping in the November sun slanting in through the windows of your house.

God had to gather his sheep because they had been scattered to the four winds. Of the Israelites, many were taken to Babylon; thousands more sought refuge in Egypt. Others fled to other surrounding nations. God resolved to spiritually gather his people from those lands. Indeed, in those distant lands, with the Jerusalem temple destroyed, they invented the Jewish synagogue to gather around God’s word and promises, they very institution that was part and parcel of Jesus’ life. The Jews, in their different places of exile, repented. After seventy years of captivity, God returned a small remnant to the promised land. This remnant re-populated the promised land and became the Jewish nation into which Jesus of Nazareth was born.

But our Shepherd-King’s rule is no earthly kingdom. It is not confined to a land on the other side of the ocean, nor is it confined to the descendants of Abraham. It is a kingdom that exists in the hearts of all who acclaim him Savior and King. And how we need this Christ, this King.

In a year of clouds and darkness, God’s people do get scattered. At first, it seemed like we were galvanized. Many attended online worship. Through the summer months attendance in person, together with online, actually was right at average, sometimes higher! But as the months have worn on, attendance is shrinking, so has the volunteerism and the contributions. People are tired of changing their routines every week or two. We get tired of the limits and rules. We are tempted to the two extremes of anger and indifference. First we want to smash things, then we want to walk away. We thought we were resilient, stout and strong. But stress leads to stress fractures. The shortcomings of leaders and pastors become more obvious, frustration grows.

First, we first allow distance to develop between us and the body of Christ. Then we allow ourselves to wander in our own ways, our own ruts, ways that please us, ways that help us cope, ways that don’t require discipline and determination. We become scattered. Yes, this is a year of clouds and darkness. That wandering from God’s ways, that relaxation of spiritual discipline, is pictured in Isaiah 53, *“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.”* That pursuit of our own ways is not a virtue, it is sin. Sure, we have excuses, even reasons. But it only reveals that our devotion to our Lord is easily challenged. And it reminds us of the most important thing our Shepherd King has done for us: *“The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all… he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth… by his wounds we are healed”* (Is. 53:6-7,5).

In our day of clouds and darkness, here stands our king. He has sought us out from our self-sought ways. He calls us to gather around Word and Sacrament. He is the phone call, the encouragement from pastor or elder to be part of our worship services. He calls us through the fellow Christian who says, “Haven’t seen you in a while.” He speaks through our conscience that reminds us that Sunday once was and still is supposed to be a time to remember God, his goodness and his ways. That conscience speaks even as we put the keys in the ignition to go do what we want to do. He calls us to his house, whether online (which is necessary for some), or in person (which, if possible, is better). He calls and gathers to the feast which he prepared for us through the sacrifice of his own life. A sacrifice made on another day of clouds, or at least darkness, on Calvary.

Our Shepherd-King not only gathers, but he also guards us. From what? Unemployment? Heartache? The coronavirus? Sometimes. But as our catechism class is learning (and here, you catechism students who are watching, I am giving you the answer to today’s quiz question number two under the Short Answer section), our Shepherd-King guards us against our three big enemies: Sin, death and the devil. Protecting us against them, he promises, ***“I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak.”*** He supplies our need. He forgives, instructs, befriends and encourages.

And then he adds, rather unexpectedly, ***“But the sleek and the strong I will destroy.”*** He is not only Jesus the Good Shepherd, but also Christ the King. Christ Jesus has an absolute right to direct our lives. We don’t have an innalienable right to pursue of our own happiness. We have an obligation to our king. Ideally, we will realize what Christ has done for us, and therefore do all he says. Ideally, we trust that he who has bought us at the price of his own blood will always tell us what is both right and best for us. But if we should forget that, Christ Jesus reminds us that he has a claim on us. He isn’t just a mascot, a benefactor, a helper, a friend, he is our King. Not by our choice, but by his. And so, on a cloudy and dark day, a cloudy and dark year, we see our King standing in our midst, and we rejoice that he is. Amen.