

Let Us Follow The Shepherd

Mascots tell us some details about people, don't they? The animal or person a school chooses to be their mascot is a big deal. When I was growing up, my parents used to joke about the mascots of their schools. The mascot at my dad's school was the Holstein cow. Or, as my dad would say: "The ferocious Holstein cow." And what was the mascot at my mother's school? Their mascot was the sheep. Now there's a mascot that will strike fear into their opponents. Tremble in fear! For the sheep have arrived.

If you were to pick a mascot for a team, what would it be? Maybe you didn't know it, but the LORD has picked out a mascot for his church. What are you in God's eyes? Are you cougars or lions or bears? No, you guessed it. You are sheep. And, above all else, what are sheep good for (except eating)? They are followers. That is our task. That is our joy. That is who we are. We are followers of Jesus, our King and Shepherd.

In the words we look at this morning we find Ezekiel writing to people who were ready to be followers. Ezekiel tells us: *"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12 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."*

As we read these words, we remember the context in which they were written. These are not the words of Isaiah, who wrote several generations before the Babylonians crushed Judah. He's writing to the people as they are being conquered by the Babylonians. And then, he writes to them when they are in Babylonia, far away from their homelands. Where the people of Isaiah's time were proud and arrogant, the people in Ezekiel's time were a broken, scattered, sad and lonely people. They were a people who saw their sin and thought that there was not hope of anyone or anything taking away their sin.

And so, the LORD gives this message to Ezekiel. He tells them that he will send to them his servant, his Shepherd. This servant would do two main things for them. He would give them two main reasons to lift up their heads and rejoice. He tells them: *"I 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."*

He gives them two reasons in this verse to be good, trusting sheep and follow him. Let's work from the back of this verse to the front. He says: *"the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice"*. These seem like some strange words at first. God is going to go after those who are fat and destroy them. In these words it seems like the LORD really, really hates obesity. But, that is not what the LORD is talking about here. What conclusion do we come to when there's a famine and everyone is suffering and starving. But, you see your neighbors. And they aren't just surviving, they're getting fat while everyone else is getting skinny through lack of food. What conclusion would you draw if you were working for a company and first it took away your pension. Then it gave your CEO a bonus. Then it took away your job. But then, it gave your CEO a raise. And then, finally the company went out of business. But, the CEO somehow got millions more money from somewhere. What would you think of that person? You would hate that person—not because he was rich. No, you would hate him because he got rich by taking from those who were poor.

And so, the LORD proclaimed this promise to the people of his time and to us as well. He will seek out, punish and destroy all those who get rich by making others poor. It may happen in this life. It will definitely happen on Judgement Day. He will destroy them, God's word tells us.

But, for us, as God's sheep—what does this mean for us? It means that we wait patiently for the LORD to do his work. He is fair. He is just. He will avenge whatever wrongs the strong and fat of this world have done to us. And there is where we see our sin so clearly. A good sheep listens, follows and trusts his shepherd. But, we can see so many times that we have not trusted. And we have not followed. We see the stock market go down and the bonus for CEO's and CFO's go up. We get angry and ask in our hearts: 'where are you God? You're not supposed to let this happen.' And so, we prove our sin, by not patiently listening to our Shepherd's voice. We follow our Shepherd because he will destroy evil and all those who get fat by stealing from others!

But, there is another detail in this verse we need to look at this morning. We follow Jesus because he destroys

the strong. But we also follow him because he strengthens the weak. The LORD tells us: *“I 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.”*

What picture do we have of the church here in this verse? The church in Ezekiel’s time was a scattered church. The ten northern tribes rebelled against the LORD. And so he sent the Assyrians against them. And he scattered them across the globe. You would think that the two remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin would learn their lesson from the bad example of their brothers to the north. But they did not. They too rebelled. So the LORD broke them and scattered them throughout the Babylonian empire.

As a result, they were a broken, terrified people. They were terrified because they had lost the promised land. They had lost the land in which the messiah would be born. Being forced to move to another place on the earth was bad. But, losing the promised land was unbearable. They concluded that since they had lost the promised land they had also lost the promise. Who would rescue them from their sins, if there was no rescuer? And so, the LORD tells them: *I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.*

These are the words that would give them peace and rest and comfort. So many of those exiles would die in Babylon. But, the LORD promised to them to raise up a shepherd like David. He would bring the Hebrews back to the promised land. And there in that land, the prophecies about the Messiah would be fulfilled. The LORD kept his promise. And the Son of David came. Even though they didn’t know his name, we do. His name is Jesus. He saved them from their wanderings and sins. And he has saved us from our sins.

But, you see, it wasn’t enough for Jesus to just die for our sins. He still has more work to do. He still has to finish his work of gathering. He will gather his scattered church across the globe and settle us in the green, lush pastures of heaven. And that is a promise we look forward to. In heaven there is no sin you have committed that will be remembered. In heaven there is not sickness you have that the LORD will not heal there. In heaven there is no enemy here who hates you who will affect you in heaven. There is not even any joy that we have here that will be worth comparing to what is waiting for us in heaven.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, continue to be sheep. Follow your Shepherd, Jesus. Follow him through the dark valleys, the lightning and thunderstorms. Follow him through the wolves, lions and bears straight into heaven. For there your pasture is waiting for you. Amen.