THE LORD PROMISES, “I WILL BE THEIR SHEPHERD”
Ezekiel 34:11-16,23f

In the Old Testament kings and rulers were often called shepherds because a king was expected to care for his subjects just as a shepherd cares for his sheep. A king should use his power and influence to govern his subjects fairly. He should protect his people, provide for the poor, and make sure the injured were nursed back to health. But at times evil rulers failed to properly care for their citizens, and instead they pursed power and riches for themselves. Jeremiah declared the Lord’s word, “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” Because they scattered God’s flock, drove them away and did not care for them, the Lord will punish them for their evil. He also promises, “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture” (23:1,3). Through the prophet Micah the Lord promised that a ruler will come from Bethlehem who “will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD” (5:4). This Ruler is the Messiah, the Anointed One, the King of kings.

In 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah for the first time. He took some captives, including Daniel, from Jerusalem back to Babylon with him. In the years to follow, when Judah attempted to defeat Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Judah in 597 B.C. to put down a rebellion in Jerusalem. The prophet Ezekiel was included in the group who was taken captive then. Finally, in 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians captured all of Judah and took most of the remaining people captive. Since Ezekiel was 25 years of age when he was captured, all of his prophetic work was among the Jews in exile. Earlier in his book Ezekiel proclaimed a message of destruction to bring repentance, here in chapter 34 he speaks of a promise of restoration for God’s chastened people.

In the verses before our text, the Lord instructed the prophet Ezekiel to pronounce judgment on the evil shepherds of Israel. The spiritual leaders of God’s Old Testament people had forsaken the Lord’s commands, were filled with greed, and were more concerned about their own welfare than the people’s spiritual welfare. God’s people were left without spiritual direction and pastoral care. But the Lord would not leave his people without a shepherd. THE LORD PROMISES, “I WILL BE THEIR SHEPHERD.” This is a promise we need because we often go astray. This is a promise God himself stands behind, and this is a promise fulfilled in Jesus.

The final Sunday in the church year focuses on Christ as the King. As mentioned before, the leadership of kings and prophets were often pictured as shepherds. Since the kings of Judah were corrupt and its spiritual leaders predicted only prosperity when destruction was imminent, the Lord says, “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.” Since Judah’s leaders weren’t speaking and acting as God called them, He promised to do two things. First, God would remove the wicked shepherds who were oppressing the flock. Second, He would personally provide for the needs of his flock. He would search for the lost, bring back the strays, strengthen the weak, and punish the proud and impenitent. The Lord accuses Judah’s leaders of plundering its people because they did not search for the Lord’s sheep but cared only for themselves. Instead of strengthening the weak, healing the sick, binding up the injured or searching for the lost, they ruled them harshly and brutally. The LORD says, “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not the shepherds take care of the flock?” (34:2)

Having dealt with the faithless shepherds, the Lord commits himself to shepherd his flock. His searching for sheep emphasizes that the sheep have gone astray. The sheep have worshiped idols and failed to follow the Lord. But with tender and loving care God vows to search for these miserable, misguided sheep. God does so many things for his wandering sheep and here is one of them — he searches for them. What a wonderful picture of the gospel, the good news of God’s grace. The Lord looks after them like a shepherd who has great affection for his sheep. Like sheep, sinners need someone who is smarter and stronger than they are to look after them. God promises to do that very thing. Not only is God smarter but he is all-knowing. Not only is he stronger, but he is all-powerful.

Just as a shepherd looks after his flock when it is scattered, so the Lord promises to rescue his people from all the places they were scattered. These words may have reminded Ezekiel’s hearers of the day they were forced into captivity. They may have reminded them of the day their beloved city of Jerusalem was destroyed. When they lost their prestigious city, they lost their capital, their center of worship, their pride and their joy. That was indeed a day of clouds and darkness, followed by other dark days in captivity.

Into this scene enters the Lord with this wonderful promise. “I will rescue them!” God will cause these wonderful blessings to happen. God was very specific. This prophecy clearly stated that the Lord would bring his people back to their own land. God promised that once again they would live in the Promised Land that He had given them years before. The Lord promised, “I will tend them in good pasture...they
will lie down in good grazing land, and...feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.” What made the pasture of these sheep so good and rich was not the land itself, but the fact that God would be the one who would shepherd his people in that land. He would give them a place of refuge from their sins and its terrible consequences.

The Lord also promises, “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.” Those who are truly God’s sheep recognize their weaknesses. They realize they are sinful and in need of God’s guidance and strength. Those who are called sleek and strong are those that feel no such need. Some of the “sleek and strong” were the so-called spiritual leaders of the people. Some even wanted to stay in Babylon rather than return home to Israel. Since such people felt no need for a spiritual shepherd, since they felt they were sleek and strong by themselves, God promised to destroy them.

The Lord promises to be our Shepherd. This is a promise we need because we often stray. Truthfully, no one on this earth is really “sleek and strong” because iniquity makes us all thin and weak. We all wander from God’s commands. We love and trust money and possessions more than God. We pursue imaginary greener pastures of entertainment or pleasure rather than worship the Lord. We are enslaved and held captive to sin. Our offenses against God have scattered us from the love and security He provides and put us in danger of eternal separation from Him. Our own personal sins bring days of clouds and darkness. The evils of society, the uncertainty of the future, hardships of all kinds, loss of loved ones, personal tragedies, overwhelming challenges, a really grievous sin – all fill our days with darkness and misery.

We need the Lord’s rescue. We need to be rescued from captivity to sin and its consequences. In a world where it’s increasingly difficult to find Christian leaders in any area of life, it is comforting to know the Lord has promised to get personally involved in caring for our needs. Listen to all the ways the Lord promises to help us. “I myself will search...look after...rescue...bring them out...gather them...bring them...pasteure them...tend them...search for the lost...bring back the strays...bind up the injured...strengthen the weak...(destroy) the sleek and the strong...shepherd the flock with justice” (v. 11-16). Christ’s death has rescued us by delivering us from captivity and certain death. Those who realize that only God could bear the load of sin and remove it have been found by God’s amazing grace, have been healed of their sin-sick souls, have been strengthened by God’s might. We weak, injured, and lost sheep have been strengthened, healed and found by a just and loving Lord.

A young boy lived in a New England seaport. He loved to watch the boats come in with their daily catch. One day he decided to build a little sailboat all his own. He worked for weeks, making sure each detail was just right. Finally, he went down to the wharf and proudly put his boat into the water. As he triumphantly watched his new sailboat, the wind suddenly changed and swept his tiny boat out to sea. The boy was heartbroken. Every day for a month he went back to see if his boat has washed up on shore. One day he saw his boat in a store window. Excitedly, he ran into the store to tell the owner that it was his boat. The woman only responded by saying that the boat would cost him two dollars. After pleading with her to no avail, he paid her the money. As the boy was leaving the store, he said, “Little boat, you are mine twice. You are mine because I made you, and now you are mine because I bought you.” In the same way, the Lord has made us and redeemed us.

The Lord Promises, “I will be their Shepherd.” This is a promise that God Himself stands behind. In the opening verse the Lord says, “I myself.” With emphasis on himself the Lord sets the tone for this section. In verse 15 God repeats what he has said before. “I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down.” Ezekiel’s hearers were to repent, to acknowledge that God, who had allowed their captivity, was their God. But where would they find the power to be comforted from their grievous sins? That power alone was found in the gospel, the news of what God, their God had done for them and would do for them in the future. The Sovereign Lord declares that He will be the Shepherd of his people! Only our true Shepherd gives us the comfort, guidance, and strength as we sinful sheep wander through this life and into the next. God concludes our text with the solemn affirmation, “I the LORD have spoken.” The Sovereign LORD has given his word, which will not and cannot ever be broken. We have the Lord’s promise that no one can snatch us out of his hand.

The Lord promises to be our Shepherd. This is a promise that is fulfilled in Jesus. The Lord says that he will place one Shepherd, his servant David over his people. He will tend them and be their shepherd. Since David had been dead for about 400 years, this obviously has to be a reference to someone other than King David. David was the great king who brought power to Israel, the man of faith that the Lord had blessed richly, in spite of his sins. Who is it that could be called David and be the one that would tend Israel as its Shepherd, who would be prince among the people? Under David’s greater Son there would be one flock, and one Shepherd. This shepherd would be a descendant of the Lord’s servant David. This is a reference to the Messiah who would rise from David’s royal line. In the Old Testament David is often named
as a type of Christ, a fulfillment of Jesus, the Son of David. David serves as a good picture because he was both a literal shepherd and a literal king.

Ezekiel’s prophecy of the Messiah as King was fulfilled in Jesus. The Gospel lesson reminds us of how after the governor’s soldiers had brutally flogged Jesus, they stripped him of his bloody clothes and put a scarlet robe on him. They twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand, knelt before him and mocked him saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” (Mt 27:28f). Ezekiel’s prophecy was also fulfilled when Jesus talked about his kingdom before the Roman governor Pilate, who said, “You are a king, then!” Jesus answered, “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (John 18:37).

Ezekiel’s prophecy reminds us of the good Shepherd, the spiritual Shepherd described in John. “I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14f). When Jesus claimed to be the good Shepherd, his hearers clearly understood that he was claiming to be God. As the good Shepherd, Jesus provides us with spiritual care, nourishment and protection. Under his reign as King, we will live securely. When we are injured from such experiences as a death in the family, unloving actions directed toward us, the decline of the condition of this world and our own society, and personal setbacks of all kinds, our loving Lord binds up our wounds with words of comfort and guidance. Our loving, caring Shepherd will carry us in His arms so that we will be able to remain in his flock on the path to heaven.

The Lord promises, “I will be their Shepherd.” This is a promise we need because we often go astray. This is a promise God himself stands behind, and a promise fulfilled in Jesus. We close with the Lord’s description of how Jesus cares for us. “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (Isaiah 40:11). Amen.