



# THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF END TIME – CHRIST THE KING

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

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## God is Our Shepherd King

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23-24 (NIV84)

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> I 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. <sup>14</sup> I 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. <sup>15</sup> I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup> I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

Good leaders know how to delegate. They realize not only that they can't do it all, but that they can and do equip and empower people who may actually be better at it than they are to do tasks that they do not have enough hours in a day to get done.

God delegated a special task to select individuals of his people, the Israelites. This wasn't because he couldn't get the work done or anything like that. He delegated at the explicit request - nay, the demand - of his people. The people wanted a king to rule over them. Not you, God. We want a king like all the other nations that surround us, nations that don't worship you, nations that don't even recognize you as God. Make us more like them. Give us a king to sit on a throne in a palace to lead our great people into battle! God warned them that granting their request would mean hardship and difficult times ahead, that their children would be turned into servants, drafted into the army. This king would get rich off of their backs, but the Israelites didn't care. They wanted a king, and God gave one to them. He delegated his rightful rule as their proper king to ordinary men.

And it turned out the way God knew it would. Base, morally corrupt kings led the people away from God, thus incurring the promised wrath and punishment from God. Jerusalem their capital, their palace, their throne room – all of it was destroyed because of their blatant and willful disobedient. When the kings failed to shepherd his people properly, God shepherded his people with justice. The sleek and the strong who thought they knew how to govern better than God were ousted while Jerusalem laid in a smoldering heap of ruins.

In our reading today, Ezekiel is prophesying in the aftermath of the failed leadership of the Judean kings. It was time to change leadership. No more delegating. God was taking back control. He is going to rule again. He's in charge. He already showed this by the destruction of Jerusalem, but listen to how he promises to rule. “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.” (verse 11) “I will rescue them.” (verse 12) “I will bring them out from the nations and gather them.” (verse 13) “I will bring them into their own land.” (verse 13) “I will tend them in a good pasture.” (verse 14) “I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down.” (verse 15) “I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.” (verse 16) “I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak.” (verse 16) God is taking over and healing the people with new leadership, a Shepherd King.

What news this must have been for those defeated Israelites. Under the rule of a foreign king, ripped from their homeland, led bound in chains or by spear-point to a foreign land, their king was defeated, but God is coming to look for them. He's going to bring them back from this foreign land and give them rest. He's going to heal them and strengthen them during this time. He is going to fix all this.

Do we ever feel like those Israelites - lost, injured, weak, and needing rest? We famously sing in the hymn *Amazing Grace* that “I once was lost.” The Israelites were lost without a homeland, lost as they had turned to other gods. Are we lost?

When we were lost, many of us, if any, didn't even know it. We looked around and thought, “You're okay, and I'm okay. We are all okay.” Then you heard even as Ezekiel prophesied, “The soul who sins is the one who will die.” (Ezekiel 18:4) Suddenly, okay wasn't good enough. I had a way, but it wasn't leading me where I was supposed to go. I was lost, on a path to death. How could I get on the right path? How could I get found?

Having taken back the shepherding responsibilities, God sought you out as your King tending to his subjects. Maybe God sought you through parents, parents who cared enough to make sure that you knew the truth of God's Word, who made sure that you would be brought into God's kingdom through the miracle of baptism which takes away our sins and makes us holy by giving us Jesus' perfection. Maybe God sought you out to bring you on to the right path through a coworker, a friend, or a neighbor. They told you their hope, their reason for living. They told you how they were lost but God had found them, saved them from their wrongdoing, their sin. God used these people to guide you on to the one way, the one path, the one truth – Jesus Christ, the Son of David. God the Good Shepherd seeks us out and finds us. He's looking for all people to be a part of his one flock of believers.

But even after being found, sometimes we stray off the path, away from the rest of the flock. We feel that temptation to stray when we have to talk ourselves into going to church Sunday after Sunday, fighting against the desire to just not go. Maybe I start to lose those battles. I miss a Sunday here, and a Sunday there. Nothing really terrible happens. I still have my faith in God. And then I'm okay with a few more here and there, and before you know it, it's become a habit. I have strayed to a place where I no longer hear my Shepherd's voice. Instead, I rule my life; I am my own King.

Yet our Shepherd King comes after you, much like he did when you were lost. He sought you with that nagging parent who wanted to see you come back to church, especially now with those grandkids who don't go to church because you don't go. He brought you back by a call from the pastor or an elder expressing their care for your relationship with God, worried that this straying will get you lost. God rescued you through that friend who reached out to you, told you that they missed you coming to church and invited you back. Through all these people, God was herding you back into the fold when you were straying, pinging your conscience letting you know that you own path without him as your Shepherd is the wrong path for your life.

The wrong path is dangerous. It was not uncommon for sheep within a flock to stumble, fall, get hurt. The shepherd would care for them, lift them up on his shoulders, bind their wounds. We know that life hurts. It wounds us in ways that we can't fix or bind up - when you lost that loved one, when you heard the results of your tests, when you didn't get that job you applied for, when you got fired from the job you depended on. Who's to blame for that? Well, God, you are supposedly in control of all things. Why did you do this to me? Why did you hurt me? Why would you take this away from me? Why did you ruin my life, take away my joy, my security, my health, my job, my child, my relationship?

The Shepherd King knows you are hurt. He hasn't abandoned you. Instead, like a shepherd who binds up the injuries of his sheep, God binds your wounds with his words of promise. He tells you again and again that he is not leaving you, that he works all things for your good. He knows that you are hurt. He knows what it's like to lose someone that he loved, as he gave up his one and only Son to death. He in fact allowed himself to be injured so that we would be healed. (The gruesome details were in our Gospel reading.) He overcame death so that we would have hope beyond this life. He binds you up through his comforting Word. He heals you with the people who come to your aid, who empathize with you, who provide what they could to help you get through. That was the Shepherd King working through these people to bind up you, to heal your injuries.

With all those injuries, all those conflicts, my energy is drained. I can't trudge on through any more of these battles in life. It's like being stuck in a swamp with the mud that sucks you in with every step. Your shoes get caked with it, and every footstep weighs more and more and pulls you down as more muscles are called to press on but you have had enough. I can't take anymore of the sicknesses, God, of the ups and downs, of the grim, grey days. I'm weak. I'm done.

Are you weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care? The Shepherd King says, "Stop carrying that around. I'll take the responsibility. I will deal with it. I will carry it. I'm your shepherd, and I'm your king who cares about all of his subjects, all of his flock. I will carry you on my shoulders. I will make sure that I will bring you out of this surgery. I will get you through that relationship crisis." The Shepherd King carries all that on his shoulders so that we don't have to. He lifts it from you so that you are strengthened. This is our Shepherd King. He will never give up this rule to someone who can't rule our lives and shepherd us in this way.

When we hear of another shepherd, we might get worried, but then we are told that this Shepherd is different. "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them." (verse 23) This is not the glory days of King David, but these are the days ahead when Jesus, the Son of David, rules over our lives by seeking us out, calling for us to follow him, to show us that he was wounded to bind up our spiritual wounds, who renews our strength with his Word. God has delegated his reign as Shepherd King to his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd. Jesus will continue to rule over us, just as his Father did. He will search for the lost and bring back the strays. He will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. This is our Shepherd King who rules over our lives with his powerful Word. Amen.