

Pastor T.C. Arnold
3rd Sunday of Easter
Ezekiel 34:11-16
April 19th, 2015

There's a minute left to go in the game. It's you verses the world. You are losing 100 to nothing. The world has the ball and they are about to score again. You are beat down, tired, demoralized, ran through, stricken, smitten and afflicted and everything else you can think of. You are at the end and you don't know how much more you can take. You just want the game to end.

And sometimes it's not just the world. Sometimes you feel as if it's God you're playing against. He's got you beat 100 to nothing and He won't let you up. He's stomping on your neck and you can't breathe. He's judged you and the verdict is guilty – dead – and there's no changing it. The Word of the law shows you where you stand before God. You have not lived up to it. You have not done what the Lord requires and now you are paying for it. God's got you down and He's not letting go.

That would be true if God's Word ended with the law. You don't live up to it. You haven't kept it. You are judged. But that's not where God's Word ends for you. Where it ends for you is where it begins for you. And this beginning of God's Word for you today is in both the Old Testament and Gospel texts. Listen to what the Lord has to share with you through the prophet Ezekiel, *“For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered... I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries.”* And then more, “I will” statements from our gracious God, *“I myself will shepherd my sheep, I will bring back the strayed, I will seek the lost, I will bind up the injured, I will strengthen the weak, I will feed them...”*

Beloved, there is perhaps no better way for us to understand our relationship with our Lord than this sheep/shepherd motif. Remember on Maundy Thursday we described sheep as dim-witted, dirty and defenseless. And, if we are honest with ourselves, this resembles us as well. We are sheep. And the Lord is the Good Shepherd. He lays down His life for the sheep.

While a dim-witted sheep would graze on the same hillside until he has turned the grass to a desert and then dies of starvation rather than move to a different place, the Good Shepherd leads the sheep to greener pastures.

Though we are dirty with wool like a magnet that attracts mud, manure, maggots caked with dirt, decay, disease. The Lord, through baptism washes us clean.

Though we are defenseless against the assaults of the devil and this world – losing 100 to nothing with one minute left to go in the game and about to be scored on again, the Lord claims us to be His own, He is the one alongside of us, not against us. He is with us and loves us. He shows us when He conquered death on Easter.

“I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.” These words that come from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel show us a plan that God himself will put into place for us. He loves with tender care His miserable fallen creatures. God is not a vengeful ogre delighting in crushing helpless victims that would starve, get infected by the disease of sin or eaten by the wolves of this world. Rather, we delight in the words written here to the Old Testament people and then repeated with all of us in mind in the Gospel text set before us today, *“I am the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep.”* That's what “good shepherds” do. That's what our Good Shepherd has done for you – His precious sheep!

In 1845 a Texas pioneer named Sam Maverick accepted a herd of four hundred cattle in payment of a debt. He put them under the care of one of his men on his nearly 400,000 acre ranch. Here they were neglected and allowed to run wild. When calves were born, they were unmarked and consequently appropriated by neighboring ranches, who immediately branded them. Their ownership could no longer be disputed, because the brand was the legal mark of identity. From this event developed the term *maverick* – an unbranded animal found straying and appropriated by the first finder.

Sheep straying away from the master Good Shepherd – the Lord Jesus – will be found and branded by the world. Straying sheep – neglecting ourselves – running away from or towards something else – will have us be taken into ownership by that which we might think is good, nice, well pleasing, by the changes and chances of this world – but is actually to our detriment both for this world and the next. We stray when we despise the hearing of God's Word, the fellowship of the company of His people gathered around His precious gifts, when we seek out the wisdom and pleasures of the world all in an effort to ignore what our Lord would have for us. Each time we take a step further and further away from the Good Shepherd, we are leaving ourselves susceptible to another rancher who might come and brand us as his own – taking us away from the precious food of life and the community of believers. We could die like this. This is a stern warning. Don't wander away from the Good Shepherd.

It is true that the Good Shepherd loves us so much that He would leave the ninety-nine sheep while He looked for the one who is lost. This means that each of His precious sheep are important. But don't make it hard on the Lord. Don't put a great distance between Him and you – a distance too far. Repent. Return. The Lord's shepherding is what we need to feed us and sustain us in those times that are so hard right now – when we are losing 100 to nothing, and our opponent still has the ball.

Here are our words of comfort: "*Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and seek them out.*" If we were to lose the most precious thing to us, we would not ask someone else to look for our prized possession and then go, sit down in front of the television, or begin reading the newspaper, do nothing and then just wait with all kinds of patience. No, we would be impatient and anxious to find what is lost. Our Lord Himself impatiently and with all divine anxiousness, seeks out those that have strayed. He doesn't send a search crew while He stands by and does nothing. God seeks out the lost because each of His sheep are His most prized possessions. God has impatient divine anxiety about His lost. That's comfort for you to know that God loves you. That's also a divine "kick in the pants" for us as Christians who are God's instruments of sharing the Good News to the lost. We can be excited about this kind of divine impatience because we are called into action by a Lord who loves you and everyone else so much He is working tirelessly to bring life to the dead.

It's true, today we are losing 100 to nothing. We are being creamed by sin death and the world. There is a minute left in the game. The seconds are ticking away. But as the final horn sounds to end the game, your team's marching band begins the victory anthem. The confetti cannons blast thousands of little pieces of paper in the air. The crowd goes wild. The world's scoreboard says you lost. But you didn't. Because Jesus won for you. He is risen. And it's this game of life with grace and faith in Christ that shows a zero on the scoreboard of the world, but a "W" in the book of life. All because of the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understand shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.