

Sermon for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Easter

The Good Shepherd

Sermon Text: Ezekiel 34:1-16



<sup>1</sup> The word of the Lord came to me: <sup>2</sup> "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?' <sup>3</sup> You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. <sup>4</sup> You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. <sup>5</sup> So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. <sup>6</sup> My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them. <sup>7</sup> "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: <sup>8</sup> As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, <sup>9</sup> therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: <sup>10</sup> This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed

*themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them. <sup>11</sup> “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, 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.*

Today’s Sunday is called “Good Shepherd” Sunday. It’s no wonder that we have singled out a special Sunday for good shepherds because we come across this image of the Good Shepherd throughout the Bible again and again. The famous King David, who wrote many of the Psalms in our Bible, was a shepherd himself. For example, he wrote Psalm 23. The trusting words, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” come from this same Psalm. We can best understand what is meant with this concept of the good shepherd, when we quickly look at the profession of such a shepherd from David’s time: Israel at that time did not have a lot of green grass. That’s why it was crucial for the shepherd to see with a keen eye where a little green grass was still available in late autumn. There was also not much water in Israel, and if sheep don’t have enough water, they die very quickly. So, the good shepherd consistently had to watch that the sheep remained near water. Furthermore, there were dangerous wild animals and often, the shepherds had to protect their herds with staffs and bare hands, at the risk of their own lives. And from all these experiences, King David wrote Psalm 23 and described God as just such a good shepherd for us people: “*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters.*” God is not only our Good Shepherd Himself. But He has also appointed people as shepherds. Already at the creation, God declared Adam and Eve as guardians over all creation. We also rely on shepherds in our human society. Shepherds can be our parents, our teachers, our politicians, and many others. Interestingly, we are often sheep and shepherds at the same time. For example, I, as a father, am a shepherd to my children. Later, my children may have to for me in my old age so that I become the sheep who is dependent on the help of my children.

There is an expectation of all shepherds that they must be good. Like the shepherds at that time in ancient Israel, they must have an eye on the green meadows. They must know what is best for their sheep. Otherwise there may not be enough for the sheep to eat or drink. Or the sheep could be eaten by wild animals. In our sermon text for today, shepherds are described who were not good shepherds. To be honest, they weren’t shepherds at all, just those who abused the office of shepherd to eat so much they made themselves fat. “They cared for themselves rather than for the flock”, says Ezekiel. In other words, they were sheep who pretended to be shepherds so that they would get the best. To see what Ezekiel means, you must know sheep. They are naturally selfish. Whoever has already seen how they drink water will know exactly what I mean here: Oh that is the perfect picture of selfishness! When thirsty sheep come to water, they simply step into the clear water with their dirty hooves and stir up all the dirt. After the first row of sheep there is only a brown liquid and the water is undrinkable. The sheep in the first row get the light clear water and the ones behind only get dirt to drink. And that’s exactly what Ezekiel means when he says: “They care for themselves.” Unfortunately, we know the same from

many examples in human history. The rich countries get a lot of the best vaccines against Corona. The poor countries get what the dirt has stirred up. And that's just one example.

But today we don't want to complain about politicians and others, even when we could certainly do so. Rather, we want to ask ourselves, where we are called to be shepherds to others: Where are these people that God has placed before us, that we should be shepherds for them? Where are the people Jesus places in our path as a responsibility? Because we enjoyed families, houses, and a good upbringing, we are the sheep who stand in the first row, able to drink the delightfully clear water. But around us, there are many who have only received dirt. There are unfortunate people, disappointed people, alcoholics, drug addicts.... These are all people who need our care. Jesus' most important customers were people just like these. Why don't we care?! We have no time! We don't want to be bothered! Most of the time, it's not even the problematic cases from the street that are placed before us and are difficult challenges for us. Most of them are our own family members. How was I a shepherd for my wife or my husband? Did I just use them selfishly? Like sheep by water. Just trampled on the feelings of my partner and destroyed everything like a herd of sheep? And how was it with my children? Should they be a beautiful decoration in my house and nothing more? How much time and care have I had left for my children? The list goes on. Were my words like arrows in the hearts of my neighbor, destroying his character. Or were my words uplifting, putting everything in the best light.

I already said at the beginning that the role of shepherd and sheep is alternates back and forth. Sometimes I am a shepherd, sometimes I'm a sheep. But the problem that Ezekiel described in our text today is that there are no shepherds at all and just sheep. How terribly poor is a society when there are no more shepherds at all, rather just those who always want the best for themselves. Then chaos is inevitable, and each sheep must fight to be at the front and get the best part of the cake. It can also come to sheep disguising themselves as shepherds, merely pretending that they want the best for everyone. Meanwhile, they only want to enrich themselves! The outcome is hell. Now one can ask why the entire herd of sheep tolerates being swindled like this. We find the answer to this question with sheep. They are namely notoriously dumb. When it comes to the most important things in life, we are just like these sheep. I don't want to say that all people are dumb. Human beings have demonstrated through science and abilities that we are very clever in some things. However, when it comes to spiritual questions, we are ignorant. And when it's a question about who our shepherd is, we are dumb like sheep and run away from the one who wants to protect us. We would much rather run after wolves as the shepherd and creator of our souls! And that's exactly what we do when we follow after all possible saviors instead of God, the true Shepherd and Creator of the universe! But God doesn't just let things continue. God tells us in Ezekiel: "I want to search for them in all places." God is truly the Good Shepherd. He also cares for His flock when they are ignorant sheep and do dumb things. And God means that very literally when He says that He will search for us in all places. There is no place that is so far away from God that He can't find us again. Jesus ties in directly to this text and shows us what it means. Jesus shows us like no other who the Good Shepherd is. He does this as He specifically seeks out the people who are the most lost. He thereby demonstrates that God doesn't want any to be lost. Jesus demonstrates this the best on the cross. There is really no place that is more abandoned by God than the cross of Jesus. And God shows us on the cross that He even reaches the deepest place of human existence. And He does all of that to find us again. He does this in order that we can again be His children! Yes, we are found by God! Even when we have hidden ourselves in the darkest corners of the world. By Jesus doing all of that, He shows us that there is again a shepherd. A shepherd we can trust

because He gives His life for us. But as Jesus gives His life for us, He Himself becomes a sheep. That's why we sing every time at the Lord's Supper, "O Christ, thou Lamb of God... Have mercy upon us." Our great shepherd, Jesus, is at the same time lamb and shepherd in the Bible. Through this, the pattern of God's flock is also laid out for us. When the Good Shepherd isn't among and in us, we are like a flock without a shepherd, wandering cluelessly and aimlessly. We also have no idea what is good for us. When we don't have the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, then we are not only without a guide, but we follow an imperfect and perishable guide that has nothing to do with the true Good Shepherd. Ezekiel prophesies very comforting words to us today: "God says: I myself will be your shepherd!" God shows us how He does this through Jesus, who died and rose for us. And it is this same Jesus who says to Peter the denier: "Feed my sheep!" Peter is able to know that his office as shepherd is a back and forth. He will always be shepherd and sheep at the same time! Sheep of the one true Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ! And that is exactly what we all may do! Through Jesus Christ, I receive confidence to be a shepherd. By knowing that He never leaves His sheep alone, I receive confidence to act out of His strength and His love. And I may do that even when I continuously make mistakes. As a shepherd, I may always remain a sheep! Amen.