



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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November 23, 2008

End Time 4

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23, 24

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23, 24

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 47

Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

Gospel: Matthew 27:27-31

### **God Promises He is our Shepherd-King**

A promise we need  
A promise we live under

Every now and then you pick up a magazine and it has a list of the most powerful or influential people in an area. You can pick up Sports Illustrated or ESPN Magazine and it will have the most powerful people in sports every now and then, and in Fortune, the most powerful people in business, and things like that. If at the time of David or the time of Ezekiel or at the time of Christ there would have been some publication that would have listed the most powerful and influential people in Israel or the most powerful and influential positions in Israel, where do you think shepherd would have ranked? Do you think it would crack the top 100? The top 1000? Probably not. You didn't sit your child on your knee at those times and say, "Someday son, you could be a shepherd." You'd probably say, "Someday son, I hope you are doing something more than just being a shepherd."

So that's interesting then when you consider that truth and see that this is how God pictures himself as the one who would be the prince, the one who would rule over his people. "I myself will shepherd my people. I will be the shepherd-prince, the shepherd-king."

Why does God use this picture? It doesn't seem to be what we would think of as a king and power and influence. But if you are paying any attention, you notice that the kingdom that our God establishes is unlike any other kingdom. He establishes it, as we heard in our Gospel, through what appears to be defeat, through being mocked and with a crown of thorns stuck on his head. They are making fun of him as a king. He sets up his kingdom through his life and his death and his resurrection, not by power, not by chariots, not by military might, but by willing to give himself for those who had separated themselves from him—all people.

So it shouldn't then surprise us that our king uses this image of shepherd because he has a kingdom that is like no other kingdom and he rules in it like no other earthly king that we can picture.

So as we think about this today, when God promises that he is our shepherd-king, think about what the means for us. It's a promise that we see that you and I need. We need a shepherd-king. Then we also see that it's really a promise God wants us to live

under. But as you think about it today, do we live under him always as a shepherd? That's something I think we need to talk about a little bit later.

Ezekiel—what do you remember about Ezekiel? Prophet, Old Testament, prophet in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, warned the people to repent because if they didn't repent and turn back to God and quit following the false shepherds of Israel—that's what he was really warning them about in the chapter right before this or in the verses right before this. God had sent prophets. God had sent all these people to lead the people back, but the kings he had placed over them who were to be shepherds for his people, the spiritual leaders he had put over them that were to be shepherds for his people went off in a different direction and were no longer proclaiming what God wanted them to. They were trying to act more in the way, I suppose you would think, normal kings act and they were trying to pedal influence, even the spiritual leaders, the way the world wants to pedal influence. And Ezekiel wrote to tell them to turn away from all of that because it was just going to cause them problems. "God is going to take you off into captivity."

And it happened. It happened during Ezekiel's lifetime. Ezekiel spent a number of decades of his own life living in Babylon. He wrote also then in his prophetic book to the people then that were in captivity and told them of God's comfort and care and told them not to despair. And that's where we find him here, right?

Think of his picture. The last king over the Southern Kingdom of Judah was such a rotten shepherd that he was carried away in captivity, blinded, and punished by the Babylonians in ways that were horrific. He had failed to do what God had set him above his people to do. So think of that picture now of God saying to his people, "The shepherds that you have had have failed you, and they have failed me, so here is what I am going to do. I am going to come and be your shepherd-king. I am going to gather you. I am going to bring you back to the places where you were scattered from on a day of clouds and darkness." As you looked back at the destruction of Jerusalem if you were a Jew—that's a day of clouds and darkness, right? "I am going to bring you back from all the countries where you have been scattered, and I am going to put you in a rich and a good land. I myself will pasture you. I will take care of you." This is what God was saying to his people; a people who didn't deserve it, a people that had failed to listen to his warnings and his rebukes. Yet God, in his love that goes beyond understanding says, "I am still going to come and do this for you."

Then he says some things that might seem a little odd. He says, "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend to them. He will be prince among them. He will be their shepherd."

David had been dead 400-500 years by this time. So he is talking about the Messiah. He is talking about his own Son whom would come. God himself would come to live and die in our place, to shepherd us through his life, death and resurrection, to rescue us from our day of clouds and darkness.

What's our day of clouds and darkness? It's not your favorite team losing. It's not something that mundane or trivial. Your day of cloud and darkness is what you see in the mirror. My day of cloud and darkness is what I see in the mirror. Sinners—people that have been separated from God because of who we are. We can hide those sins from each other but we can't hide them from God. God knows them completely, fully, and thoroughly and yet he said, "I'm going to be your shepherd. I am going to come down. I am going to live in your place. I am going to die in your place. I am going to rise again and that is going to take away every last one of your sins."

That's an amazing picture of God's love, this picture of God as shepherd. It's what we need. We need a shepherd to take care of all of our needs because we can't offer it to God on our own. We can't come to him on our own. We need him to come to us because we are like sheep without a shepherd without God. So he comes. He makes us his own. He gives us the gift of faith through the Spirit. He gives us the means of grace that we grow in that faith.

But did you notice in here that he talked about how he would have the people live? He would have the people live in that rich and good land. And he would pasture them and feed them and care for them. He does that for us through Word and through Sacraments so that as we receive his very body and blood, we know that our sins are forgiven. And we go forward then to live for him, to live as we go about the hills and the mountainsides of Israel, which is where we are today, where we live. That's the hills and mountainsides of Israel for us.

He gives us that same good food, that same rich pasture, the same promises of a Savior, only you and I see it from the completed side of the picture as opposed to the children of Israel. They were looking forward to it. You and I have the advantage of seeing exactly how he did it all. And now, in response to that, we live under this promise.

We are to live with God as our king, our shepherd-king who meets our needs, but still our Lord, the one we live for, the one we serve, the one that moves us to do all that we do. The question I have for you today is, do we always do that? Do we always live motivated by the love God has shown to us? Or do you and I at times fall back to living for something else? For ourselves, motivated by Law? I think that's an interesting concept that we need to wrestle with and understand.

One of the things I hear from time to time in our congregational life is that, "Well Pastor, it's good and well that we talk about God's love and the Gospel, but in order to get rid of this debt, we have to get out there and use the Law and tell people they have to give." No. We need to talk about the Gospel. We need to live in response to God shepherding us, not live in fear of his club of the Law. We are motivated by Gospel. You might say, "We know that. We understand that."

I had a fascinating discussion with the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders a week or so ago. Introduction to the Ten Commandments, the Law, and why we do what we do, those

kinds of things we talk about in Confirmation Class. I don't know how many of you are familiar with it, but basketball season is starting now, right? And along with basketball season, something else is going on that's always been going on at school. There's an Accelerated Reader program. They have to get so many Accelerated Reader points. If they don't get them, then they have some consequences, alright? A month ago if you didn't get your Accelerated Reader points, the consequences didn't seem to bother some of the kids I talked to. But now that basketball is starting, if you don't get your Accelerated Reader points, what's the consequence? You can't play basketball.

So I started out with a simple question, what do you love more, basketball or God? Well that's an easy question, right? Everyone knows the answer is always God. That's the answer to any question the pastor asks, isn't it? If you say "God," you should be alright. What do you love more, basketball or God? "God." You're sure, right? "Yes, we love God more."

So the Accelerated Reader program, now you are getting that done, right? Now this month you are going to make sure you get it done? Why are you making sure you get it done this month? "Because if I don't, I won't be able to play basketball." You mean you're not doing it because you love God who took away your sins? So now you are doing what God has put you in the school to do, to do your homework, you're not doing it because you love God? You're doing it because you love basketball? "Yes." That was the answer I got. At least they were honest, right?

So then we talked about it a little more and I said, "Really, when you think about it, is it that you love basketball, I know you love God more than you love basketball, but look at how your sinful nature is leading you to act now out of love for basketball." Then I said, "Is it really just love for basketball? Or is it that you enjoy basketball, so really it's love for yourself, right?" I love me and I like this so I'm doing it because if I don't do it, I won't get to do this, and I won't be as happy. So in reality, we are not living because he is our shepherd-king, we are living because we might have a consequence taken from us, right?

So then I asked the next question. By this time their eyes were glazed over like I was talking Greek. The next question I asked was, "Are you telling me then that if you get your work all done but you are doing it because you love yourself or basketball more than you love God and you don't want those taken from you, are you telling me that even if you get all the work done, get all your assignments done and get all good grades, is that a sin?" How can getting your homework done on time be a sin? If you do it out of love for yourself instead of out of love for God; isn't what we've learned a good work is something that is done according to God's will and out of love for God, not out of love for self and not out of fear of the Law?

Now think about this. Okay the kids, enough picking on the kids, what about you and me? Are there times that we are tempted to sin and we don't do it because of fear of consequences and then we pat ourselves on the back because we didn't sin, but in reality we are acting out of love for ourselves or love for something else? You see

someone that is attractive and you lust after them but you don't act on it because you don't want the consequence of what it might do with your spouse or with your family. So is it the Law motivating you or is it the love that your shepherd-king has shown you?

If someone says something to you that really, really irritates you or hurts you and in your mind you have just actually broken off one of their arms and beaten them to a pulp with it, but you didn't act on it. You pat yourself on the back. Why didn't you act on it?—because you can't detach their arm, or because there would be a consequence of that physical activity if you actually struck someone else?

The truth of the matter is that you and I don't always live under the motivation that is the most powerful motivation for us—the love that God has for us. We still often only live out of love for ourselves and fear of what it might do to us. It's true that the Law does serve as a curb. God puts that there so it curbs our sinful nature, but you and I don't just have a sinful nature. We have the new self that loves our shepherd-king. This is what makes it all the more amazing—that as we consider that even when we want to pat ourselves on the back for not sinning, in reality, God looks at us and sees why, because I can hide it from you and you can hide it from me, but God sees our motivation and to him it still is sin when we are motivated for a different reason. And the fact that he says, "I'm still going to come gather you. I still love you. I still lived and died in your place and I have taken away even those sins you don't recognize. And here's the water in your baptism that washed them away. Here's the body and blood in, with and under the bread and the wine that takes them away." This is amazing love that our God has for us. We have a king that is like no other. He doesn't rule out of power or threats or fear or intimidation. He rules in love. And his love is right there for us always, in the Word and in those Sacraments. And his love is amazing when you contemplate it.

Our shepherd God is exactly what we need. The more time you and I spend with Word and Sacrament, the more we will live in response to that love, joyfully and willingly.