

## **Last Sunday in the Church Year November 20, 2011**

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 "God, Herd Us"

We sometimes hear in the news about a child who has disappeared and the search efforts that follow. We rejoice when the lost child is found, and we are sorrowful with the families whose loved one is either never found or is not found alive. Our own hearts are filled with panic when we are out with our children and we turn around and one of them is missing. I remember one occasion when Bayley was just a toddler. We were attending an evening reception at a pastoral conference. We were in one room with the pastors waiting to be called to the dining room, and other groups and individuals were scattered throughout the facility with their own evening festivities. When we were called, we went to the dining room to be seated, but we turned around and Bayley had disappeared. Panic cut through our hearts as we began running around searching for our lost child. However, joy filled our hearts when we finally found her and scooped her up into our arms.

Today our readings reveal a loving and searching God who does not stop until he finds all those who have strayed from him. The Bible uses the image of scattered sheep, where God is the shepherd who seeks out the sheep to return them to the fold. On this Last Sunday of the Church Year, we picture a day when the fulfillment of all things has finally arrived and we are in heaven. Christ has returned, the end of the world is here, and we are gathered to heaven, in joy, with all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ.

Listen again to the first words of our Ezekiel reading...

*11"For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. 12As 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 on a day of clouds and thick darkness.*

The Bible often uses the image of God as a Shepherd. I think God likes that image of himself or he wouldn't use it so frequently. Good shepherds are faithful to their flock. They lead them to good pasture and to water, they protect them from predators, and they regularly count the sheep to make sure they are all present. If any sheep is missing, the shepherd searches for the lost sheep and brings it back to the fold. The shepherd makes sure none is lost.

God is like this with people, too. Ever since the Garden and Eden when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, people have become scattered from God. You see that first when Adam and Eve are hiding from God in the Garden of Eden. They are afraid of being confronted by God because of their sin. Even today people hide from God, even though no one can ever really hide from God. God is present everywhere, knows everything, and knows where people have gone into hiding. Nevertheless, people hide from God because of the guilt they carry with them through life because of some past disobedience, or because of the pain someone else has caused them. Other people hide from God because they've been away from the church for a long time and have lost the way back, or are afraid that God will not welcome them. Still others hide from God by redefining the basis of their faithful relationship to God according to what they feel is an acceptable level of obedience and personal goodness.

The truth is that all attempts to fit into the flock apart from God's plan in Christ fail miserably. On the day Adam and Eve sinned, all people strayed from God. Some people refuse to believe in God, and we call them atheists. Other people are called agnostics, because they don't want to make a commitment one way or another. Still others know there is a God, but they set limits or define the basis of their relationship. The truth is that we have all strayed from God. We all come into this world separated from God because of our sin, and the sinful nature we inherit from Adam and Eve soon reveals its ugly head when our own words and behavior begin to show their true colors.

Ever since the beginning, God has sought out people to bring them back to himself. God sought Adam and Eve when he gave them the promise that a child descended from Eve would defeat their enemies – sin, death and the devil. He sought out Abraham and promised that a great nation would descend from him. He sought out the people of Israel and delivered them from slavery in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land. He sought out Israel in Babylon where they were in exile because of their disobedience and idolatry, and he returned them to Jerusalem. He sought out fallen humanity when he sent his own Son to take our flesh and blood, perfectly obey the commandments, take our punishment for sin on the cross, and then rise from the dead. He seeks people today from all around the world and he works to rescue them from every misguided religion devotion they observe, until they know his Son, Jesus Christ, and his saving love.

Christ has come as our Savior from sin, and he provides the daily bread we need, just as the shepherd provides food for the sheep. God once provided manna, quail, and water for the people of Israel when they came out of Egypt, and God daily and richly provides everything we need for our bodies. God provides this daily food for everyone. However, God also provides the spiritual food we need in our life's journey to heaven. God provides the waters of baptism to quench our spiritual thirst and to make us his children. He provides the good food of his Word to encourage us in our daily lives so that we will grow up and be conformed to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. He also richly feeds us in the Lord's Supper, personally giving to everyone who eats his body and blood with the bread and wine the entire forgiveness of their sins, so that they – and we – are renewed to serve Christ and the Gospel.

Just as God, our Shepherd, provides us the spiritual food we need to approach him through Christ, he also leads us to Christ where we find rest for our souls. God has provided the Sabbath Day as a day of rest and reflection on God's Word. Every day is holy to the Lord and a day we rest in the forgiveness of our sins because Christ has come, but at St. Paul's we set aside Saturday or Sunday as days when we can gather together as the church to worship. We come together as the church and we rest in the forgiveness of our sins because of the victory Christ has won for us through the cross. And one day God will bring us to himself in heaven where we will see with our own eyes the eternal rest God has prepared for us in Jesus Christ – free from sin, free from death, and free from the power of the devil.

God has set a future date for separation and judgment. In the Gospel reading today, Jesus uses the image of separation of sheep and goats. The sheep are the ones who have loved and served Christ. They show in their lives what Christ has worked in their hearts through the forgiveness of sins and the cross. Contrasted with these sheep are the goats who have not loved and served Christ. They have served themselves and shut out the forgiveness of sins and message of the cross.

The Old Testament reading also contrasts these people – not as sheep and goats – but as strong, fat sheep and weak, lean sheep. The strong and fat sheep do not have their hearts set on Christ. They have defined their own standards, and they push and shove the weaker sheep away from the flock until they have been scattered away from the flock. They should have used their strength to help keep the flock

together. Instead, they push the sheep outside the flock, or in other words, they have used their influence or strength in ways that has damaged the church and the weaker members of the Body of Christ. God, as shepherd, speaks his word of judgment. They will not enter his rest and the gift of heaven.

However, God has not forgotten the weak and lean sheep. God will rescue them from where they have strayed. He will speak tenderly to them with the message of love in Jesus Christ. He will shepherd them back to himself, to his Church, and ultimately to eternal life in heaven.

Where will you stand in the Day of Judgment and at the time of the end of this world? God invites us to come to him and take our stand on Jesus Christ, the Son of David and king of heaven and earth. Jesus is our Good Shepherd who leads us to God by way of the cross. He laid down his own life for us at the cross after we lost our way back to God because of our sin. He raised himself from the dead when his sacrifice was complete, and he raises us to live with him in forgiveness. Jesus is our life and salvation to lead us to heaven and eternal life. We take our stand on Jesus Christ, our Shepherd who leads us to God.

We came into this world miserably lost and helpless because of our fallen sinful nature, and so we strayed from God. However, God sought us out by sending Christ, and he has brought us back into the flock, the Christian Church. We take our stand on Christ, now and forever in heaven.

*soli deo gloria*