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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/20/2011, Christ the King Sunday
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46
Seeking, Strengthening, and Defending the Flock

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our First Lesson, from Ezekiel 34. As I read it aloud, let us note our Lord's determination to take charge of his people. For now, he entrusts leadership to ordinary men and women like you and me. But one day, he will lift the responsibilities of leadership from human shoulders, and he himself will rule. Thus says the Lord GOD:

¹⁵*I myself* will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice. (Ezekiel 34:15-16, RSV)

The image of the "shepherd" was an honored image for political leadership in Israel. The "king" was supposed to be a "shepherd" of the people. Kingship was to be a servant ministry in which authority is granted to the king for the sake of taking care of the flock. If the king is granted power and wealth, he is to use those good things for the people.

But, alas, many of Israel's kings were bad kings. Instead of protecting the people, they rather fleeced the flock, indulging themselves at the expense of the people. What these bad kings failed to understand, is that the true King, the King of all creation, regards their evil deeds and will surely call them to account someday.

THREE PROMISES

From a rhetorical point of view, our text illustrates that beautiful Biblical device called "parallelism." Our Monday evening Psalm Class encounters this device again and again in the Psalms. "Parallelism" means that an idea is stated and then stated again. It is as if the two sides of the sentence say the same thing. This duplication both intensifies the idea and helps develop it.

So, in our text, we have three promises, but they are each stated twice. They go like this:

¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed. (Ezekiel 34:16, RSV)

You see what I mean? There is not much difference between seeking “the lost” and bringing back the “strayed.”

Next, we hear of the divine determination to strengthen the flock:

I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak...

And finally, we hear of the Lord’s intention to establish justice within the flock:

...and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice.

This, then, is a sermon called “Seeking, Strengthening, and Defending the Flock.” My theme in each case is that Christ the King is bound to accomplish these things when he returns to establish his kingdom here on earth, but that meanwhile, he asks you and me to be divine undershepherds, striving for these same divine goals. Our Savior Jesus wants us to be a royal people even now, seeking, strengthening, and defending our neighbors.

SEEKING

First, the Lord God will seek the straying. In its original context in Ezekiel, this promise probably refers to the Lord’s intention to bring the exiles home from Babylon. But why were they exiles in the first place? From the point of view of international power politics, the Israelites were captives of Babylon because Babylon was a might empire, while Israel was a tiny, insignificant one. But that is not how the LORD sees it. From the divine perspective, the Israelites were captives because they had strayed. They had dallied with sin and idolatry. They had wandered from the ways of the Lord. And in straying, they had fallen into misery.

When the kingdom of Jesus comes, all people will stop their straying and come together before the throne of Jesus:

⁹Therefore God has highly exalted [Christ Jesus] and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11, RSV)

Then, we will each have an earnest pastoral conversation with Jesus, and our straying days will be done. So, will the wandering days of our neighbors.

Meanwhile, citizens of Christ’s kingdom should seek even now to seek the lost and to bring back the straying. That one on your heart, for example, that one who nigh breaks your heart over and over again through straying into sin, do not give

upon that one. Do not strike from the register of your heart that prodigal one, but continue to pray and urge that one back toward life in Christ.

And remember too to support the church, for the church exists to seek and to save those who are lost. This is our business, our mission: we are to try to raise up faith on earth and to keep it alive.

NEXT, STRENGTHENING OUR NEIGHBOR

For this duty, I want to refer to this morning's Gospel Lesson about the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46) It seems that the goats failed in many ways, but the fundamental form of their failure is that did not even try to strengthen their neighbors. And in failing to do that, they failed to minister to Jesus himself.

Notice that the goats are without excuse because the things asked of them are not beyond their doing. Jesus does not ask them, for example, to break the prisoner out of jail, like Jason Bourne or Mission Impossible. No, this mission is not impossible. They are not to break the prisoner free, but simply to visit the prisoner.

In this same manner, they are not asked to heal the sick, but simply to visit them. Do not leave them lonely.

Welcoming the stranger: that is not beyond our doing.

And when it comes to feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and clothing the naked, we hear no word that this must be done in a lavish way. We hear nothing of banquets or fine wine or costly clothing. No, we are to help our neighbors as we are able.

As one of the ancient preachers put it, we are to strike fear into the heart of Satan by our kindness, by our resemblance to Jesus:

... become like Him, to the utmost of thy power. No longer then will the devil be able so much as to look thee in the face, when thou art become such a one as this. For indeed he recognizes the image of the King, he knows the weapons of Christ, whereby he was worsted. And what are these? Gentleness and meekness...He took him by gentleness, he turned him to flight by meekness. Thou also must do this...Christ gave thee also power to become like Him, so far as thy ability extends. Be not afraid at hearing this. The fear is not to be like Him. Speak then after His manner, and thou art become in this respect such as He, so far as it is possible for one who is a man to become so. (Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew 25)

When Christ the King comes again, he means to "bind up the crippled" and "strengthen the weak." Meanwhile, let us aim to do these things, thereby ministering to Jesus himself in the form of the poor neighbor and coming to resemble more and more the One whose name we bear.

DEFENDING THE FLOCK

The third promise in our text is the promise of justice. The Lord is determined that his flock shall have justice. He will watch over the fat and the strong sheep to make sure they do not bully the weak ones. He will feed his people with justice.

Oft times, wickedness goes undetected in our world. There is a passing scene in a Sherlock Holmes story in which Holmes and Watson are traveling by train out into the English countryside. Watson is as merry as he can be to be looking at nature and the quiet country farmhouses and villages. But he notices that Holmes seems to become ever more depressed as they travel along through the picturesque fields. For fun, let me read the passage. It begins with Watson's dismay at how Holmes suspects crime in the countryside:

“Good heavens!” I cried. “Who would associate crime with these dear old homesteads?”

“They always fill me with a certain horror. It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.”

“You horrify me!”

“But the reason is very obvious. The pressure of public opinion can do in the town what the law cannot accomplish. There is no lane so vile that the scream of a tortured child, or the thud of a drunkard's blow, does not beget sympathy and indignation among the neighbours, and then the whole machinery of justice is ever so close that a word of complaint can set it going, and there is but a step between the crime and the dock. But look at these lonely houses, each in its own fields, filled for the most part with poor ignorant folk who know little of the law. Think of the deeds of hellish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and *none the wiser*.”

“The Copper Beeches,” *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892)

But the thing is, judging by Bible, *there is* One who is “the wiser.” There is One who perceives the crime, he records it in his eternal memory, and he resolves to set it right. As a friend of mine once put it, “The resurrection of Jesus means that in the end, no one gets away with anything!”

CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY

Christ the King Sunday celebrates the fact that one day the rulers of this world are going to be released from office, and God himself shall take charge of things. Those other rulers, then, can go fishing, I imagine, and enjoy their rest. They can enjoy their rest, that is, if they have been righteous rulers. If they have tried to protect the innocent and to restrain the evildoer, and if they themselves have lived

upright lives, then in peace they can yield their crowns to the true King, even Jesus Christ our Lord, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Ahh, but if those rulers have been on the side of wickedness, then they will get their comeuppance at last. For the true King “executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed.” (Psalm 103, KJV)

LAST JUNE’S THEOLOGY CONFERENCE. DR. DALE ALISON

Last June I attended a theology conference in which a lecturer set aside his text as he was drawing near the end of his speech and gave a personal testimony to his longing for the return of Christ. This lecturer was Dr. Dale Alison of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Dr. Alison referred to the theologian Albert Schweitzer, who saw Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who spoke a lot about the Kingdom of God drawing near and about the Last Judgment.

And why not? Alison asked. Why not cherish the teaching of Jesus that the end of things is drawing near? When you think of all the suffering in this world, when you realize that with modern technology, \$200 could purchase a hand-powered water well in Africa and bring some health to a whole village, but they do not have the \$200, when you think of the serial killers and all the quiet deeds of injustice committed around the world, why not believe Jesus is soon to come again? That he stands right on the brink of coming again?

In his list of sorrows, Alison happened to speak of the animals of this world:

I am glad that Jesus is coming again because I hate this present world. When I think of all the suffering in this world, when I see dead animals lying on the highways and so many other sorrows, who cannot believe that the Kingdom is at hand?

And I thought that was a great image of things gone wrong in our world: dead animals lying on the highways. What do the animals know? They are built for the woods and the meadows. What do they know about crossing highways? And since then, this question has been magnified with the Zanesville, Ohio tragedy of that private zoo. The madman owner killed himself and let the animals free, with the result that nearly all of those animals were put down.

After an all-night hunt that extended into Wednesday afternoon, 48 animals were killed... Those destroyed included 18 rare Bengal tigers – an endangered species – and 17 lions, six black bears, two grizzlies, a wolf, a baboon and three mountain lions.¹

¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/scandal-of-the-private-zoo-that-ended-in-slaughter-2373749.html>

Things just are not quite right in our world. Is it any wonder that the Bible continually cries to the Lord, “how long?” and that the final prayer of the New Testament is Come!

²⁰He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. (Revelation 22:20, KJV)

MY SERVANT DAVID

As I draw near to the end of this sermon, let me draw your attention to the conclusion of our reading from Ezekiel 34. Throughout the reading, the Lord God has been speaking about his determination that *he himself* shall rule his people. He will protect the weak and the frail sheep, he will restrain the strong and wealthy sheep who are so strongly tempted to overrun the weak ones. The Lord promises that he himself will take charge and establish justice on earth.

But suddenly, our great passage ends with a shift. The Lord God concludes by speaking of David:

²⁴And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. (Ezekiel 34:24, RSV)

It is as if he is confusing himself with David. I mean, in the sequence of the Bible, David was a great king, but, alas, he has died. By the time of the prophet Ezekiel, David has been dead for four centuries. Yet the Lord explains his intention to rule his people by saying that his servant David will rule.

Clearly, this David is a mysterious character. It is hard to sort out the boundaries of this David and God, and this David seems to be undisturbed by the fact that he has died. He seems unconquered even by death.

And this is why we sing of Jesus, for he is this David. This is why we call this Sunday *Christ the King* Sunday. For we look forward to a day, surely coming, when Jesus shall be King, not only of your hearts, but of all reality.

To this great King be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.