

We have a God who cares for your every need. The Psalmist writes, **“O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.”** He knows you. He cares for you. He is your great shepherd. **THE LORD ATTENDS TO HIS PEOPLE.**

Yet our Old Testament text opens with a warning. **““Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD.”** I. Careless shepherds don't attend to the flock. The leaders of Israel were not doing their job. These shepherds were the kings, the priests, and the false prophets of Israel. They led the people of Israel into idolatry. They said, “It’s okay if you worship other gods, the more the merrier!” They led by example, and their example taught that it doesn’t matter how you live. Live the high life now and leave the dead to worry about the afterlife.

And this warning is for good reason! The other gods of the ancient near east were nasty. Some involved child sacrifice. Others involved self-harm, as we see in the case of Elijah and the Prophets of Baal as the false prophets cut themselves to get the attention of their idol. Yet other gods introduced to the Israelite people involved worship through committing adultery with temple priestesses. The Lord wanted to prevent His people from making mistakes that would harm them both spiritually and physically.

Today, you need to be careful about what shepherd you seek out to guide you. The talking heads on TV may appear to know everything, but often the news stations trade in fear and outrage for viewers and ad revenue. Celebrities seem to have everything together, but with their divorces, breakups, and substance abuse—perhaps that beauty is only skin deep. A self-help guru may seem to have all the answers, but often they can’t follow their own advice. There are many unreliable shepherds out there that want your time, your attention, and most importantly, what’s in your wallet. Even though they may have a following, they only destroy and scatter the sheep of our God, Yahweh’s, flock.

Yet the Lord gives a threat to these bad shepherds, **“Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD.”** II. The Lord attends to the careless shepherds. I love this turn of phrase. Yahweh, the Lord says to these bad shepherds, if you don’t take care your sheep, I’m going to take care of you! If you don’t visit your sheep, I’m going to visit you, and, no, I won’t be bringing presents.

God made true on these promises. And so it was that many of the evil kings, priests, and false prophets throughout the Bible met wicked ends. Phinehas and Hophni were wicked priests who didn't know the Lord, and would essentially steal from the offering plate, they died in battle and the Ark of the Covenant was stolen. The prophets of Baal died at the sword of Elijah. King Ahab was killed in battle, Queen Jezebel died outside the city walls with dogs licking her sores.

Today, we may find false shepherds: godless leaders, sinful celebrities, or other such bad people—we may be troubled by them. We are never to wish evil upon others, and we do not take things into our own hands to harm others, but we can take this passage as a reassurance, the Lord will take care of those who are scattering the sheep and destroying the flock. Vengeance is the Lord's, He will repay, as surely as He promises to tend to and take care of the sheep of His pasture.

Yet the Lord God promises that He will fix what is wrong and gather again the sheep of the flock. III. The Lord attends to the lost sheep. **“Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.”**

Yahweh Himself will gather the remnant of the flock. He will rescue the sheep from the various places they have been scattered. What the Israelites may have thought this meant is that the Lord would re-establish the nation of Israel after foreign invaders conquered both Israel and Judah. However, we as Christians understand this to be fulfilled in God's establishment of the Church.

There are two ways that the Lord gathers the sheep. He gives the first way in verse 4: **“I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.”** First, the Lord attends to the lost sheep through shepherds. Pastors are called to tend to their flock. They are called to visit them! As undershepherds of the Good Shepherd, pastors are called to take care of the spiritual needs of their flock. This spiritual care happens primarily on Sundays in the Divine Service, but it also happens in those in-between times.

Spiritual care happens with the pastor visits and visits with his people! It happens when the pastor sips a cup of coffee as a member tells him of her latest medical woe. It happens in conversations before and after Bible study. It happens in conversations around the dinner table, in the home, and at graduation parties. It happens as the pastor lives life with the people God has given him to serve.

Pastors are also sinners, and sometimes, they can be the bad shepherds described earlier in this chapter, yet when everything is working properly, pastors have an overwhelming urge to gather the flock given to them. They have a joy when not a sheep is missing on a Sunday morning. They have a pleasure when they hear back from a parishioner that they haven't seen in months.

Pastors are often likened not to shepherds, but to sheep dogs. We even wear collars like dogs! Sheep dogs run circles around the flock to gather them, so that not a one strays from the fold. Sometimes the sheep dog needs to herd a stray sheep back to the group, but the sheep dog spends the day running in circles with his tail wagging and no shortage of energy. The sheep dog barks at intruders, but that bark simply alerts the shepherd of oncoming danger.

Secondly, the Lord attends to the lost sheep through the Righteous Branch. Verses 5–6: **“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”**

In this text, Jeremiah foretells of the Great Shepherd, Jesus, who would gather the sheep. This shepherd is also a king, as our text declares, but the nation He would institute is not a physical country, but the Church. The Church is the new nation of Israel—not a country on a map.

We see this Righteous Branch in action in our text from Mark. **“When [Jesus] went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.”** Even in the feeding of the five thousand, the Shepherd doesn’t scatter the sheep for them to find their own food. He provides the food for them that they may eat and be satisfied.

But the ultimate example of Jesus gathering the sheep is when this Righteous Branch was hung on the tree. Jesus says elsewhere, **“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”** The evil shepherds in Jesus day would crucify the shepherd. They would scatter the sheep as the disciples were scattered on Good Friday, but in this act of destruction, all the nations were gathered to Jesus.

And so it is that we gather around the cross today. We gather around the cross because in Christ and His crucifixion, we find forgiveness, peace, and a new start. In the cross of Jesus we fear no more and are no longer dismayed, but we find a place where we belong. In the cross of Jesus, the sheep dogs, that is, the pastors, find the power to go forth with their mission, even if imperfectly.

And when Jesus rose, He made a new nation. Not one on a map, but the nation of the Church. We are the Church, surrounded by the Good Shepherd. We have been made alive. And the Lord sets a table before us today as we gather for communion which continues to breathe life into us, the life of Him who died and rose again. Turn away from the bad shepherds who seek to scatter and destroy, and gather before Jesus who is the Good Shepherd, the Righteous Branch, and **“The LORD is our righteousness”** Amen.