

Sermon for August 14, 2016 - VBS ("Circle J Ranch") Sunday

Ezekiel 34:11-16 (NIV84)

Theme: Jesus is our Searching Shepherd.

- 1) *He looks for his scattered sheep (11-13)*
- 2) *He comforts, feeds and leads us home (13-16)*

¹¹ " For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶ I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. . .

Do you ever wonder what it would be like to be a real life cowboy? I got to experience it once when I was around 12. My Dad and I went on a father/son trip together to eastern Montana where my Dad was going to install a new pastor at a country church. At the service, we ran into a rancher my Dad knew from when he was a pastor in Great Falls. He invited us to have breakfast on the ranch early the next morning, so we went.

When we got there he gave us the news: some cattle got through a broken fence and he needed to round them up. He was wondering if we would like to be cowboys for a day and help. We happily agreed, so he had his ranch hands saddle up the horses and we three set out to spend an entire day on the range – rounding up cattle under the big, blue, Montana sky.

I'll never forget that day because, as it turned out, we not only rounded up quite a few cattle, but also some stray horses and a lost flock of sheep! Mr. Stensvad really loved his animals. He didn't want any of them lost. This is why he took the time to ride out on the range – finding the lost and bringing every animal back to where it needed to be.

In our sermon text, the LORD describes himself as a shepherd; that's a rancher who takes care of sheep. We are his sheep. God uses this picture of shepherd and sheep to teach us how much he loves us. Let us consider this love, under the theme: **Jesus is our searching Shepherd.** *1) He looks for his scattered sheep. 2) He comforts, feeds and leads us home.*

Part One: He looks for his scattered sheep.

Imagine, after a hot humid day, a nighttime thunderstorm rolling over the prairies. Rain, hail, lightning and thunder: it would be terrifying enough for us who are in the comfort of our own houses, but just think what it would be like for the animals stuck outside – especially if they lived in ranching country like eastern Montana, where there are barely any trees and very few places for cover. Storms like that can send animals into a frenzy. You can just imagine how scared they are and how easily they could get hurt.

After a storm like that, a good rancher will go out to check on his animals. He loves them and does not want any of them lost or hurt. He'll enlist the help of his ranch hands and will not stop until he has found every single animal.

The LORD also seeks us out like a rancher after a storm. He says in our sermon text: *I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹² 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.*

Like scared, little sheep all people have run away from God. What scares us? The threat of punishment.

Children, you know how you feel when you do something wrong – like breaking something your parents told you not to touch. You're scared to tell them because you might get spanked or grounded. You feel like hiding. If you can understand that feeling, then you can understand why all people run away from God.

You see, God has given us his Holy Law – the Ten Commandments – and told us not to break them. God said that the punishment for breaking any one of his commandments is eternal death in hell. He's very serious about this, because his commandments are meant to give us wonderful blessings.

But guess what? Every person on this earth has broken his commandments. And because we have done this, we are scared of God because of the punishment he threatened. This is why people run away from God in the same frenzy as an animal running away from a storm!

But God does not want us lost in hell. He loves us. Even though we have broken his precious commandments and have gotten ourselves into a lot of trouble, he still loves us so much that he took it upon himself to save us. And how did he do that? By taking on human flesh and blood so that he could be like us in order to suffer our punishment in our place. And that is exactly what Jesus did on the cross: he suffered and died for our sins, and then he rose again so we can live with him forever in heaven.

Because Jesus did this there is no reason to be afraid of him any longer. He wants us to know this and return to him. This is why Jesus looks for us like a rancher looks for his animals after a storm. He calls out to us through his Gospel – telling us that everything is ok, that we don't have to be afraid of him anymore.

And just as scared animals don't always come right away to a rancher, so also scared sinners don't always come to their Savior when he first calls them. A rancher will often call on his ranch hands to help him round up his cattle. Our Savior calls on Christian parents, pastors, teachers and friends to help him round up his lost lambs. They come to us with God's Word. They warn us not to run away because that will just get us into more trouble. And, just as a person might entice an animal with the food it loves, so also God's helpers entice us with the spiritual food our souls need: God's Gospel promises of forgiveness, peace, love and eternal life with him forever in heaven.

In this way God calls out believers from every nook and cranny in this world, gathering them together to be his dearly, loved sheep; as he himself says: ¹³ *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.*

Part Two: He comforts, feeds and leads us home.

Now, when a rancher gathers his scared animals, he knows that some of them might be very hungry, others might be very thirsty, and still others might be hurt. This is why a good rancher won't drive his animals hard, but tend to their needs – giving them food and water, and making sure they are healthy after such a traumatic experience.

Jesus, our good Shepherd, treats us in a similar way. He says: ¹⁴ *I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.* ¹⁵ *I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD.* ¹⁶ *I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. . .*

Where is the rich pastureland to which Christ lead us for spiritual rest, renewal and peace? It is his Word that we hear at Church or read in the Bible. God's Word tells us of the countless ways Jesus cares for us.

For example, if we are tempted to worry whether or not we will have enough to eat or drink, we can remember that God created the heavens and the earth. All things belong to him. And just as he feeds every animal, so he will feed us – for the Bible says that we are much more valuable to him than they.

If we are worried about all the scary things happening in the world, we can remember God's promise to send his angels to protect us from all harm and danger. God himself promises to be with us and work in all things – even the bad and scary things that happen – for our eternal good.

When we are sick, we can take comfort in the fact that God has the power to heal us. Not only that, but if God allows our sickness to linger or allows us to die, he promises that even death will be a blessing for us. Our believing souls will be with him as our bodies rest in the grave. Not only that, but God also promises to raise us up from the dead, so that we can live with him forever in paradise.

And what is the paradise God is preparing for us? The Bible tells us that it is a perfect place where there is no sin, sorrow or death – only things that are lovely and good. Imagine a beautiful mountain forest or flowery meadow with no mosquitos and ticks. Imagine every animal being at peace with you so that you can play with them. Imagine no crime, terror or threat of war. Imagine no illnesses and nothing that makes you sad. Imagine all that and, on top of it, Jesus will be there – smiling upon you and always ready to give you a hug. He will spend time with you – showing you his wonderful creation and allowing you to enjoy it forever because, in his home, there is no death.

It's to this wonderful place that God is leading us. We can't get there on our own. We need him and his forgiveness – the forgiveness he won for us by dying on the cross for our sins and rising from the dead so that we can live with him forever in heaven. Whoever repents of his sins (that is, says sorry to God and means it) and trusts that God will forgive us because of what Jesus did on the cross, that person is forgiven of all sin. He has been adopted into God's family. He is one of Jesus' precious lambs whom he will continue watch, feed, guide and lead home to himself in heaven.

Better than any rancher, Jesus is our searching shepherd, who constantly is on the lookout for his scattered sheep. He comes to rescue us from the dangers that threaten us. He comforts, feeds and leads us home. May these truths lead you to ever love, trust and listen to him. Amen.