

Can you believe that in just four more days it will be Thanksgiving? It seems like only a week ago it was Halloween. Is there any Trick-or-Treat candy remaining at your house? If so, then I am willing to guess that there aren't any Reese's Peanut Butter Cups left. The reason for my prediction is based on a survey I read last month which said that Reese's Peanut Butter Cups are the most loved treats to receive at Halloween. When I think of Reese's Peanut Butter cups, and I know I'm dating myself here (!), I sometimes think of this great commercial that was on when I was a kid: In it two teenagers were walking down the street not looking where they were going. One had a chocolate candy bar in his hand and the other was snacking with an opened jar of Peanut Butter in her hand. As they turned a corner, they ran into each other... literally. The candy bar gets stuck in the peanut butter jar. And the girl says: "Hey! You got chocolate in my peanut butter!" And the guy says, "You got peanut butter on my chocolate!" Eventually they each take a bite of their accidental creation and decide the two things really *do* go together and are even better than before! What seemed like an awkward, even unnatural, combination not only ends up working, but it's actually very good! And so, to this day we have one of the most popular candy bars in America- Reese's P.B. cups!

In our text this morning, the prophet Ezekiel links a couple of unlikely things together. Not chocolate and peanut butter, but something much greater: They are the images of Christ as Shepherd and Christ as King. Now, that may be a combination we think just won't work. After all, Kings are regal and powerful, dressed in fine robes, and they rule with authority. Shepherds are lowly and often dressed in rough work clothes. In many ways, shepherds are actually servants of the sheep. The shepherds are always having to work long hours looking after the helpless sheep. But through the prophet Ezekiel, our Savior tells us that He is both of these. Jesus is our Shepherd, *and* He is our King. He is the Good Shepherd Who gathers us together under His protective care and He is the King Who provides for all our needs.

The prophet Ezekiel was a man who had a very colorful ministry. He preached to the Israelites both before they were taken away as captives in Babylon and after it, as well. Before the Captivity, Ezekiel told them, "God's judgment is coming! Don't even think about escaping from it." But then afterward, when the people were languishing as captives hundreds of miles from home, he said to them, "Wait! Don't give up! There's still hope." That hope is what we hear in today's text, as God gives a direct promise to the Israelites. "*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... And I will

set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them” (Ezekiel 34:11-12, 23-24).

Eighteen times in our reading you can see the word “I”. God was contrasting what the kings of Israel had done to them led them astray from the truth, to what **He** would do for them. Even though they had rejected Him as their King, He would step in and rule over them anyway. You can tell from these words that the Lord isn’t at all happy with the way His people were being led, and it was time for Him to intervene and take control of the situation directly Himself. This intervention would not be a hostile and violent takeover as so many earthly rulers ascend to power and try to keep that position. A prime example of that was ruthless and murderous King Herod who ruled Judea at the time when Jesus was born, more on him in a moment.

Here in our text, nearly 600 years before Herod’s time, God announces through Ezekiel that He is about to take action and God compares His coming intervention to a shepherd being placed in the middle of a scattered flock of sheep.

As I mentioned earlier, that may seem like a strange combination at first: How can God, our Savior be both a great King and a lowly Shepherd? Those two images just don’t go together. But actually, isn’t this a **wonderfully accurate** description of God becoming man in the person of Jesus Christ? At the time Jesus was born the Jews had been scattered- spread out- throughout the world through several captivities over the centuries. The only people living in Bethlehem - right near Jerusalem - were a few Jews. The remnant of Jews living throughout Israel were relatively small - most of them had intermarried with Gentiles and taken on different religions. But in the midst of this mess, God became man. He didn’t come in the clouds and wipe out King Herod and all of the opposition. He simply appeared right down in the middle of it all with hardly a sneeze - being born as a baby in a dirty cattle stall - of all things! He didn’t murder anyone to become king. He didn’t lie about it. He wasn’t secretive about it. He very plainly said through the Old Testament prophets, “I’ll be born of a virgin. I’ll come through the line of David. I’ll come in Bethlehem.” How Herod must have laughed that day when he heard that the next King of the Jews was only a baby! This baby had no power! It had no talents! All he had to do was kill the baby in infancy, problem solved - or so he thought. Even the world may have thought, “What kind of a king is this, being born in a cattle stall?”

Yet this is one of the most interesting and wonderful things about Christ our King - the way in which He comes to us and rules over us. The holy, all-powerful God, the Maker of Heaven and Earth comes as a humble baby in a cattle stall. And

as He grows, instead of putting on a crown and King's clothing, He assumes the role of a shepherd!

He uses the same kind of gentle, humble ways of working in our lives today. Think of what a wonderful thing it is when a baby is baptized as Emmitt was this morning and Emberly was yesterday. You don't have to take the child by the feet, shake him upside down, and spank him to get the devil or sin out of him. All that needs to be done is to pour the gentle waters of life over it and say, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In this seemingly weak and simple thing God powerfully works faith and forgiveness. That is an awesome thing! We don't need to blow up buildings or threaten death to make converts to Christianity. Nor do you need to make a stirring and passionate speech to convince someone into becoming a Christian. All God calls us to do is to tell people they are sinners who have a loving Savior in Jesus Christ. We don't have to be intellectually superior to be Paul or Peter. All we need to know and say is that Jesus is the Savior of the world. As Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes!" (Rom. 1:16) The Prince of David – Christ, our Good Shepherd King - continually comes in gentle and yet powerful ways.

In verse 12 of our text God says of His Sheep, "I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness." Although God is probably referring here to the day when the Israelites were taken captive into Babylon. That phrase, "on a day of clouds and darkness" can remind us of another important day. A day nearly 2000 years ago, when "From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. (And) About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ... "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:45-46). On the day Jesus died, from noon to three darkness covered the land. On this one day, God punished the world for its sins, and made the payment required. It was this one dark day that the one they mocked as the "King of the Jews," proved He was the King of the world, as He made the world right in God's sight, and drew us back into His kingdom. On that day, the Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep.

Once the crucified and risen Shepherd-King brought His people back into His kingdom, He said, "¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice" (Ezekiel 34: 14-16). You may not see the pastures. You may not have grass on which to lie down. You may not be looking

over the Jezreel valley in Israel. But think about how good it sounds when you hear Jesus say to you, “though *your* sins are like crimson, they shall be as white as snow” (Is. 1:18). Think about how good it feels every time you taste of the Lord’s Supper, knowing that Jesus died *for you* and you are holy in His sight, it’s as if you were a sheep laying in the middle of a lush green pasture, content and secure.

Every time you read God’s Word you get a wonderful view of the landscape of His grace, as we see Him take care of and guide His disciples and describe to us a wonderful place He is preparing for us in heaven. That’s what Ezekiel is talking about here. We experience this every time we feed on the Word of God.

In the end, the combination of Shepherd and King in the person of Jesus Christ is really a wonderful comfort and joy to us. Instead of being a combination that is awkward or unnatural, it is a union that brings us all that we need from a powerful King who can provide for His people while leading them as a gentle Shepherd. As we look forward to and even long for heaven, that perfect place, where the sorrow of sin and the curse of death are no more, we rejoice that Christ will be our King and Shepherd forever. Amen!