

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, November 23, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE SHEPHERD'S MISSION"

Ezekiel 34:15,16

A small town newspaper once published two photos side-by-side. One showed a local farmers' flock of sheep gathered together for shelter as a storm approached. The other showed the mayor and town council members seated around a table at city hall. But the captions were mixed up. Underneath the mayor and councillors it read, "Naive and vulnerable, the sheep huddle together for security against the uncertainties of the outside world."

But couldn't that be said about many gatherings of people, especially in these troubled and turbulent times - Prime Minister Harper meeting with provincial premiers, or with leaders of the G20; President-elect Obama huddling with his advisors, the CEO of General Motors gathering with the Board of Directors; the auto workers' union president gathering with workers. Perhaps it's true for us as we come together in the house of God. Of course, we gather to worship God but I think we also huddle together for security against the uncertainties of the outside world. We gather together as sheep who belong to the Divine Shepherd. We together gather under his care.

One of the most beloved Biblical images is that of God as the Shepherd of his people. "The Lord is my shepherd" begins the 23rd Psalm. This image of the shepherd came to be applied Israel's King, and then to Israel's priests and religious leaders.

Ezekiel 34 begins with God's judgement on Israel's shepherds, the kings or the priests, perhaps both. God says to them, "You've taken care of yourselves, but you haven't cared for my people. You haven't fed and cared for them. You haven't searched for and rescued the lost. You haven't strengthened the weak or healed the injured. They've become confused and scattered. You're not good shepherds." So God speaks judgement on them, verse 9, "Therefore, O shepherd, hear the word of the Lord...I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable ...I will remove them from tending my flock..." Henceforth God says, V. 15 "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the LORD God." And God tells us his ultimate plans. (V. 23, 24) "I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed

them; and be their shepherd. He shall be prince among them." Now Ezekiel's prophecy was spoken after David's kingship, so he was referring to a forthcoming ruler from David's line. And the prophecy was fulfilled centuries later by Jesus Christ who said, "I am the Good Shepherd."

What I want to focus on today is the Shepherd's mission. This is important for us to think about as we "huddle together for security against the uncertainties of the outside world." Whether it is God's action as Shepherd over Israel, whether it is Jesus acting as the Good Shepherd in the days of his flesh, or whether it is the living Christ acting through the church and by the power of the Holy Spirit now, the Shepherd's mission is the same, yesterday, today and forever. God speaks in verse 16, "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice." This is what the Divine Shepherd is doing among us and through us. This is the Shepherd's mission in the world and through the church today.

First of all, the Shepherd's mission is to seek the lost and bring back the strayed.

The Shepherd is very committed to this aspect of his mission. Verse 11 & 12, "I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out...I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness." Verse 16, "I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed."

Now Ezekiel's original prophecy referred to God seeking and bringing home his people who had been scattered into exile. But spiritually this is what God is still doing. He is seeking those outside his family in order to bring them home. For we humans have a tendency to wander off from God, to plunge into the wilderness, to walk in spiritual and moral darkness. It happens through carelessness or through a deliberate turning away from God. But in love God seeks for the lost and the strays, in order to bring them back. Jesus said, "I came to seek and save the lost." Jesus endured the ridicule of the religious leaders as he sought for and rescued those who were living far from God. Even more significantly, he endured death, even death on a cross, to overcome the sin and fear that would block our return to God. Because of what Christ did in his cross and resurrection, the door is open. No one who turns to God and desires to come back to his family will be rejected.

Jesus Christ is still seeking the lost and bringing them back to God's family so they will love, worship and serve God. Without violating anyone's freedom

to say "Yes" or "No", Christ seeks the lost so that they may spend eternity with God and his people, rather than apart from him. Nothing brings more joy to God's heart than when a stray is found and returns home to God's family.

It's said that when a sheep gets lost or falls over a ravine, the shepherd doesn't go after it right away. If he goes too quickly, the sheep resists the shepherd's advance. He knows that the sheep must stay lost for a few days, and become weakened by the lack of food, before it will allow itself to be found and carried home. So it is that God come to people when they realize they're lost. It's when they know that they can't save themselves and that all the attractions of this world can't satisfy that they are willing to come home to God.

Have there been times when I was far away from God? Absolutely. But in various and surprising ways and at the right time God found me, and drew me back to himself. And probably it's been the same for you.

I have to keep reminding myself that this aspect of the shepherd's mission is so important, and so vital for the church. Yes, we must care for those who already belong to God's family. But the church must also be busy seeking and rescuing the lost, both those who have never known God and those who once belonged to God's family but have fallen away. Does that mean that the church needs to be more inviting, more evangelistic, more attuned to the culture in which lost people live? Yes, it does. The church is really being the church when it shares the good news of Christ's life, death and resurrection, so that people's hearts will be turned towards God and drawn by love into his family. The Shepherd's mission is to seek the lost and bring back the strayed. And he calls and empowers the church to join him in this mission.

Here is the second aspect of the Shepherd's mission. "I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak."

Inevitably sheep get injured in the wilderness. They get hurt by thorns and rocks or injured by predators' attacks. They sometimes fall into ravines. Very gently the shepherd comes to bind up their wounds and help to make them strong again.

Now we too endure physical injuries, and with time most of our physical injuries do heal. But we are not sheep, we are humans. Living in this world and in community with others is often wonderful, but can also inflict injuries on our spirits. We all gather here bearing inner wounds, from both the sins we commit and the sins we endure from others. We come confused by life and fearful of the future. We come with anxieties and weaknesses and uncertainties. All of us have spiritual wounds that are often much deeper than physical wounds and take

much more time to heal. But we meet together in the presence of the Good Shepherd who heals our wounds and strengthens us in our weakness.

Now I can't do this healing. Only the Good Shepherd can do that. But I can try to pray and preach in a way that helps the Shepherd's healing, strengthening power flow into your life. And it happens. A person once wrote in the church guest book, "Thanks for the service and for the peace." I am glad people find forgiveness and peace and hope in this place. May the Good Shepherd touch and heal your spirit today so that you go from here strengthened to face tomorrow, with a sense of peace and forgiveness and hope, empowered to share those blessings with others. "I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak."

There is one more aspect of the Shepherd's mission. It's to spread justice among his people. "The fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice."

The Divine Shepherd's great concern is that all his sheep share in the good pasture and fresh water he has provided; in other words that all have a sufficient share in his bounty. And the fat and the strong have a choice. If the fat and strong stay fat and strong at the expense of the poor and weak, then God will judge them, even destroy them. But if the fat and the strong join in God's mission to feed the poor and the needy God will surely bless those efforts.

Quite frankly, most of us are quite strong and fat according to the world's standards. Most people in this world live day to day. And even in tough times, perhaps especially in tough times, we can still share in God's work of spreading justice.

One Sunday a minister in Detroit, Michigan by the name of Rev. William Quick was in his study when a man knocked at his door, handed him an envelope and said, "Read this after church." Following worship, Rev. Quick opened the envelope and found a note reading, "In the midst of the terrible recession which has hit Detroit large numbers of people are discouraged, out of work, hungry and cold. Many are surely finding their way to our church. During our morning devotions today, my wife and I decided that no one in real need should be turned away. We don't want our pastor to be unable to meet their needs for food or medicine. Take this and put it to work among the needy of this city. We wouldn't want to make it to the Pearly Gates and be turned away because we had plenty while others were starving or freezing to death." On the check these words were written in the memo line "To the glory of God and for the work of Jesus Christ through the church."

None of us can do it all, but individually and together we take part in the

Shepherd's mission. We are the sheep of His flock through our faith in Jesus Christ and so we will not be lost or cast aside when Christ returns as judge. But in exchange for that assurance, God expects us to join him in his great mission. "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice."