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“Thus says the Lord, Yahweh, ‘Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have 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.’”

Yahweh continues. **“I 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. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord Yahweh.”**

It reminds us of that familiar psalm, Psalm 23, about our Good Shepherd Jesus who leads His sheep to still waters and makes them lie down in green pastures. What a word of comfort for the people of Israel! What a word of comfort for us!

But Yahweh continues: 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.”** Still sounds pretty good. Yahweh continues. **“And the fat and the strong I will destroy.”** Oh! Maybe we don't like that verse. And our lectionary conveniently leaves out verses 17-19.

¹⁷“As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord Yahweh: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. ¹⁸Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? ¹⁹And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?”

Why can't we just skip to verse 20 and following? Let's leave out that middle part. Let's focus on the wayward shepherds. Then we can keep God's judgment at arms-length. It's God's shepherds, the priests of Israel, who are rotten! *They* were getting fat and happy while the sheep were being trampled upon! Never mind those words **“As for you, my flock”** The people, the sheep are basically good, right?

Well, what do you expect to see this week? A feast on the table. Maybe a smaller feast with fewer family members in attendance this year. But food dripping with butter and gravy and whipped cream. And then what? Friday. Black Friday. Maybe better put...bleak Friday. A day of rest for many who would normally work. A day of travel for family coming or going. And on the news—maybe in Phoenix, or Chicago, or New York, or some other big city—what do we always expect to see? A day of trampling. Whatever the newest toy craze is or the hot ticket electronic items and a sea of people...pushing aside with shoulders, thrusting at the weaker among them with, maybe not with a horn, but an elbow.

Bleak Friday. A day when many, even Christians will look like goats, will look like Israel of Old, serving the god of mammon with its materialistic temptations rather than giving thanks to God Almighty for what He has already provided. It's almost a sure thing. And we will watch these people on the news and sit there shaking our heads. *At least we don't do that. We don't behave that way.* A good deal on a TV isn't worth hurting others. And once more, God's judgment is held at arms-length. *Those people. Those people should be ashamed of themselves. Pushing aside. Trampling. What nonsense! Those people!*

But Yahweh continues, this time in the incarnate Son of God in our Gospel reading today. And God's judgment hits a little too close to home. We can't hold it at arms-length anymore. It turns out it matters, not just that we avoid outright trampling of others, not just that we avoid doing some things, but that we have *not done* other things. As you and I *did not do* to or for one of

these...you and I did not do to or for Jesus. And once more we are confronted with the fact that all we like sheep have gone astray. ^(Isaiah 53:6) The law always accuses us of what we have done as well as what we have left undone.

This is our story. If we say it's just the wayward shepherds and people of Israel, it's not the whole story. If we claim it's just *those people* who make the news, it's not the whole story. **If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us** and *we* don't have the full story. ^{1 John 1:8}

But there is something else we all should expect to see at the end of the week. It will appear many times on social media from several friends and family members starting this week and in the coming month, perhaps on several greeting cards, maybe even on signs in peoples' yards. As we close out one church year and enter into another, as the Thanksgiving holiday passes and we shift gears, many of us will see a silhouette or maybe an artistic photo of a replica of a manger, accompanied by the words, "the reason for the season." A manger yes, but not just a manger. That's a bit shortsighted. That's not the whole story. The reason for the season: a cross. And yet not just a cross. That's not the whole story either. The reason for the upcoming season for those who know the rest of the story: an empty tomb.

"For thus says the Lord Yahweh: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out..." And Yahweh continues. **"I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep."**

And Yahweh continues in the incarnate Son of God. **"I am the good shepherd. The Good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."** ^{John 10:11, 17-18}

And yet not just an empty tomb...your empty tomb...a kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For God has made you His sheep. Not because you have done. Not because you have avoided doing. But because you have believed in the Good Shepherd who continues to shepherd you, who laid down His life with outstretched arms to keep the punishment of God's judgment at more than arms-length from you. To take it upon Himself and remove the punishment from you. And then to stand on the third day as your Shepherd still, standing in between not wolves, or thieves, or wayward shepherds, but between death itself and you. Christ the firstfruits. And you, His sheep, the rest of the harvest.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, if we had only the readings appointed for us this morning, it may start to look like our works save us. But God continues. We know the rest of the story. We know that we are created for good works. But we are not saved by them. ^(Ephesians 2:10) This is the difference between justification and sanctification. Justification always comes first. To borrow from Luther, we are not made God's sheep because of our good works anymore than an apple tree is made an apple tree because it produces apples. An apple tree produces its fruit simply because God made it an apple tree. Likewise, God's sheep do unto others the works of God and in so doing do unto Christ Himself simply because God has made them His sheep.

We will struggle. We will fail. All we like sheep have gone and continue to go astray. But Yahweh has and continues...to shepherd us. To seek us when we are lost. To bind us up. To speak a word of comfort and forgiveness through His undershepherds. To pour out His grace and forgiveness through His sacraments. And when He returns, on the Day of the Lord, on the Last Day, He will carry you and me, His wayward, yet repentant and believing sheep home to an inheritance, a kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world.

As we close one church year and begin the next, on Easter Sunday, today, and every day after, this saying is true of our Good Shepherd. Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.