

The Last Sunday of the Church Year  
November 26, 2017

Text: Psalm 95:1-7a

Theme: "Sheep of His Hand"

At last, we are here at the last, last Sunday of the Church Year. It reminds us that the Day of the LORD is approaching. As we saw last Sunday from Zephaniah that is not necessarily a pleasant day. It could be a day of darkness and gloom, wrath, distress and anguish (Zephaniah 1:14-16), but for others a day of the beginning of the greatest joy that knows no end. It depends whether one is a sheep or a goat.

Sheep and Goats is a motif in our readings this day from Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 25. The Fourth Sunday of Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday, but shepherding is certainly prominent today also. We have been through all those Sunday after Pentecost (this year 24 of them) and now we are back to the Shepherd. We never leave Him actually, more importantly He promises never to leave us. Today we see the Shepherd comes as the Judge of the Living of the Dead, Living and Dead who are either sheep or goats. In our section from Ezekiel 34 we have sheep, but no goats. There are goats in the verses that come before those sections chosen for the reading (vss 17-19). They are pictured as treading down the grass and muddying the waters for all. The old master goat's specialty is muddying the waters. In verse 20 and 21 of Ezekiel 34 we see sheep exhibiting goatish behavior. They push and shove to get their way.

In our text from Psalm 95 we clearly see God is the Shepherd, and the good news is we, believers, are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. In the last few verses of Psalm 95, we have a warning against goatish behavior. "Today, if you hear His voice, <sup>8</sup> do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, <sup>9</sup> when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. <sup>10</sup> For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways." <sup>11</sup> Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest.""

These verses carry the readers back to the wilderness days and wilderness ways of their fathers. It was God shepherding them throughout and providing. He did so through His undershepherd, Moses, who, by the way, had 40 years of actually shepherding experience. He had 40 years with sheep and goats and then as it turned out another 40 years with sheep and goats only of the two legged variety. Well God did provide daily and faithfully, food and water for 40 years, always. He also provided their clothing by preventing their clothing from wearing out. Those being shepherded were often not grateful.

On two different occasions at two different locations described for us in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20 we see unthankfulness and complaining. It is two different generations but the same goatish attitude. Both times God still provided. These two incidents are like bookends of their goatish behavior for 40 years. God was not pleased with most of them and He overthrew them in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:5).

Goat life, do we not know something about that? It really is a way of death. We are all born, even conceived goats. We were left leaning, left destined if left to our abilities, that is, goats left to the left of the returning Jesus. We did not have to be taught about basic goat behavior. Actually, each thought of his or her goatself as the most important self. We thought we knew better than the Shepherd about the best path to walk. We preferred grass and water to our taste. Goats were all we would ever be. As the leopard can't change its spots the goat can't lose its goatee. Oftentimes we were proud of our goat behavior when we could manage to get someone else's goat and come off as the most clever.

But we have been changed, brothers and sisters (rams and ewes), a change from the inside out, a miracle, from goats to sheep in the Good Shepherd. But the old goat nature is still there, always in this life. The master goat tries to goat us back into goatish behavior, convince us that self-shepherding is the best, urging us to strike off in paths of goatish desires. Instead of resisting that old goat call we are urged to give in to it. The master goat would muddy the waters by trying to distort the words of the true Shepherd. He would have us be like many in Israel, complaining about the Shepherd's care and concentrating on how others are not following the Shepherd. He urges us to veer to the right or to the left of the Shepherd's lead so that the old goat nature shows through. What he is really aiming for is for sheep to disappear and for the goat to rule.

The master goat also tried to goat us into despairing sheep. 'Maybe,' he tells us, 'you have wandered so far that the Shepherd is glad to be rid of

you. Face it, you are a goat, my goat, that's it. The future may not be bright, but you may as well enjoy the goat path the best you can.'

But the Shepherd tells us otherwise. We are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand! (vs 7) It is quite a hand. The LORD is a great God, a great King above all gods. He is the only God. He holds in that hand the deep places of the earth and the heights of the mountains. From the deepest depths to the highest heights, He's got it all in His hand. He made and formed it all, the sea and the land. It was all created, shaped, and formed at His Word. His own heights and depths are unsearchable. Yet He does search us out.

He has rescued us from the goat. He has come in person. "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down...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, and the fat and the strong I will destroy." (Ezekiel 34:19) Our Good Shepherd is not like the hireling who cares nothing for the sheep, the hireling who sees the wolf coming and runs like a scared sheep. No, this Shepherd came that the sheep may have life and have it to the full. He is willing to give His own life that it might happen.

The Shepherd lays down His life for the wandering sheep. The Shepherd is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He lays down His life and takes it up again just as He said He would. He is still calling, caring, leading. He calls through the law so the sheep and goats may know they are wandering. He calls through the Gospel through

which the Spirit works to bring back in forgiveness or to bring in for the first time. He comes to the sheep as they gather, like now. And one day He does return, King of kings and Lord of lords when every knee will bow and every tongue confess—the sheep in worship and joy, the goats in terror and anguish.

We give thanks for the miracle of new birth as sheep. We have gone from goats to lambs. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18) We have been washed, the whitest wool you ever saw! Our robes have been washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. We, the baptized, have been buried, raised, clothed and empowered. We remember that miracle throughout our days on this world.

What about our goatish moments (or maybe more than moments)? We remember we don't belong to the goat, but to the Lamb. We remember we have baptized for the old Adam (or old goat, if you like) in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die will all sins and evil desire, and that a new man (sheep) should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Renewing Spirit, hear our praise  
For Your baptismal pow'r  
That washes us through all our days;  
Lord, cleanse again this hour. (Hymn 591, stanza 4)

We have been made sheep to do sheep things, things like giving to eat and to drink, to clothe and visit those in need. We are serving our Shepherd by serving those in need, especially the other sheep. We do so

not for our glory, but for the good of those served and the glory of God. We have been freed from a goat eternity by the Lamb, freed from pushing and shoving and going astray to provide, assist and follow. God puts the opportunities right before us to do this, works through us so there may be more sheep.

We are singing sheep as we look forward to our Lord's return. The LORD, the great God, who made all and preserves all, has made us the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. He has come to us to feed us and lead us now. "Oh, come, let us sing to the Lord...let us bow down before Him."

#### Venite

**☐ O come, let us sing to the Lord,  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.  
Let us come into His presence with thanksgiving,  
let us make a joyful noise unto Him with songs of praise.**

**For the Lord is a great God  
and a great king above all gods.  
The deep places of the earth are in His hand;  
the strength of the hills is His also.**

**The sea is His, for He made it,  
and His hand formed the dry land.  
O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the Lord, our maker.**

**For He is our God,  
and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.**

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning,  
is now, and will be forever. Amen.**