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## Proper 20 • Ezekiel 34:11–16; 20–24 • November 23, 2014

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## **God Protects and Heals His Flock**

When faced with the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel describes the judgment on those shepherds responsible and the reasons for the fall. In our passage he declares that God will provide new shepherds who will care for the flock and will tend to them properly. In the intervening verses, he then warns the people about panicked and shortsighted selfishness in the face of crisis, as well as indicating that judgment is coming and God will send one righteous Lord from the line of David to care more deeply for the flock.

## **Preceding Context**

In chapter 33 Ezekiel speaks of the consequences of not warning sinners of their evil acts and judges those responsible for such warnings that they will face the same consequences if they do not warn the wicked. Ezekiel then announces that it was because of the wickedness of the city and because of its defilement that God has judged Jerusalem. The beginning of chapter 34 is a diatribe against the rapacious shep-

herds who have only been concerned with their own gain and not with the good of the city and the kingdom. God will rescue his flock from such rapacious men.

### **Following Context**

God will restore the city and beat down the chaos caused by its abandonment. The savage beasts probably indicate foreign threats (as opposed to the fat sheep, who are an internal, domestic threat, see below). This makes sense as the next chapter deals with the fall of Edom.

### **Problem with the Pericopal Selection**

I wish the committee selecting the passage would have left the passage alone and not have excised verses 17–19. The passage as edited eliminates some clear statements of law and the original text makes a superior presentation to the redacted version. As a preacher, I would modify the reading to include the redacted verses. In this contribution I will use the full text.

### **Points of Interest**

God will restore his flock by gathering the scattered among them, as the text describes in some detail. Furthermore, he will richly feed his flock on the mountains of Israel. This means that the entire land will be at peace. God will search for the lost, restoring them. God will destroy the sleek and the strong, and he gives the reasons why in the passage not included. They have not only had enough for themselves but have selfishly taken more than they needed and have also ruined the environs for the other sheep so that they starved. This point represents significant law for a culture of greed and narcissism. God will therefore judge the strong, bullying, selfish, fat sheep, and he will protect and feed the weak sheep. He will do this through the “David” he has appointed, the Christ. And God will, through this Christ, usher in a kingdom of peace and righteousness.

### **Law and Gospel**

There are three axes of law in this text: the first is law against the shepherds who have neglected their duties, the second is against the sheep who have brutalized their own people, and the third is against those foreign powers who would take advantage of the situation (the wild beasts). The main issue of law here is selfishness under duress where love for the neighbor is required.

The gospel is found in God’s restoration of his kingdom through the work of the Christ, the new David who is to come. It is found in the provision of a gracious and just Lord, who will bind up and care for the weak and injured and make them to lie down in those green pastures. Here Psalm 23 would be appropriate as a supporting text. Although there are tie-ins with the gospel reading for today, I would consider using the John 10 text on the good Shepherd and his sheep. The feeding of the five thousand in John 6 would also work well as it specifically says, “Jesus said, ‘Have the people sit down.’ There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down . . .” (Jn 6:10).

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It is more difficult on the basis of this passage alone to make direct tie-ins to the cross and resurrection, but there is no reason that these matters cannot be brought in as support for what and how Jesus gives us his body and blood as “grass.”

### **Two Kinds of Righteousness**

For those who would preach using the two kinds of righteousness as a paradigm, one could begin with a briefer presentation of the matters of law and gospel above treating how God brings his righteousness to us through the new David and then discuss how we can also love our neighbor in times of hardship and trouble. To me, this text lends itself more easily to a law-gospel presentation.