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Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kickstart.
We're sparking your thoughts for Sunday
as you plan your sermon or teaching lesson.
I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau.
I'm talking with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger.
They're both professors of homiletics
here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.
You can hear all about us in our introductory episode,
but trust me, they're pretty good preachers.
Okay, let's get started.

Peter: Peter, where are we in the church year?
We are celebrating, or talking about,
the 26th Sunday after Pentecost,
which happens to be the last Sunday in the church year.

Jessica: What's the text for this week, David?

David: Ezekiel 34, 1 Corinthians 15, Matthew 25, and Psalm 95.

Jessica: All right, as always, I ask each of you to tell me
which text you would choose to preach on this week.
David, will you go first?

David: I'm going to preach on the Ezekiel 34 text,
which is a beautiful text
because it's kind of like the 23rd Psalm, right?
It's just a text where God depicts Himself
as seeking out His people like a shepherd.
So, Jessica, could you read verses 11 through 13?

Jessica: For thus says the Lord God,
Behold, 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 been scattered.
So I will 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 bring them out from the peoples
and gather them from the countries
and will bring them into their own land.
And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel,
by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places
of the country.

David: Okay, and it just keeps going on.
I mean, it's beautiful, tender, loving care
after loving care after loving care.
You get to verse 16, I'll seek the lost,
I'll bring back the strayed, I'll bind up the injured,
I'll strengthen the weak.
It's just, it's such a gracious Psalm.
But.

Peter: But, there are a couple verses.

David: I know, I know.

But, I mean, I think that for me it's the context

of the Ezekiel 34, it's the context of Ezekiel 4 that's really important, is that God's shepherds, the religious leaders that God has called to care for his people, have abused them, have failed them, have scattered them, have injured them, have hurt them, have deserted them. And that's why you have this strong stress that God's gonna come in and do what should have been done. I mean, the very beginning, behold, I, I myself, you have this emphatic emphasis that I'm finally gonna do what nobody else, what they should have done, what I called them to do, and what they didn't do. I'm gonna clean up their mess. And you have this, this image of God coming as the shepherd to care for his people who have been abused by the shepherds that God himself called and appointed to take care of them. And to me, the reason this is important to me is because I got my hair cut the other week.

Jessica: I was gonna say, I know this.

She doesn't look nice, I know.

David:

I got my hair cut and I was talking with the person who was cutting my hair, I go to great clips, you know, and you never know who you're gonna get.

And, and so she was chatting and it's always, you know, like, what do you do?

And, you know, I tell them what I do.

And it usually brings out the same story about why I don't go to church.

You know, here's why I don't go to church.

And she told me a story of things that happened, which in my estimation were wrong.

And so it's not like she, you know, said, you know, I wanna go and, you know, live licentiously and therefore I'm leaving the church.

It's like, no, I had this pastor who treated me really poorly and I'm sick of it and I just don't wanna be there.

And I had that experience and I was at a wedding.

You know, I officiated at the wedding

and then you're sitting around at the rehearsal or the dinner, the reception, you got your collar on and people are drinking and then they come over to you cause you got your collar on, it's like a magnet.

You know, and then they start telling you about, you know, well, I don't go to church anymore because blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

I don't go to church anymore.

We have this beautiful image of God who is not going to abandon the people his pastors have offended.

He's gonna come and he's gonna find those people and he's gonna bind them up and he's gonna care for them

and he's gonna bring them back into his church.
And I just think of how many, you know,
there's a lot of people who leave church
for a lot of reasons,
but there are some who leave because of behaviors
that are wrong on the part of the clergy.
And, you know, it's kind of like this text
gives you the opportunity to tell the church at large
that we as clergy are sorry.
You know, we're sorry.
If we've offended you, if we've hurt you,
we're sinners too and we're sorry
and we believe in this God
who is not going to let you fall away.
So, I mean, it's a hard thing, right?
But, I mean, you know, my aunt is Catholic
and she's really upset with the Catholic Church
because she's like, you know what?
They never come clean.
They never come clean and say,
this is what our priests have done.
If they would just come clean
and apologize for it and repent and ask for forgiveness,
she said, I'd be okay, but they don't.
And I thought to myself, you know,
it would be nice to have a Sunday
where the church confesses that she isn't always
what God called her to be.

Jessica: And not just pastors though, it's all of us.

David: It's all of us.

Jessica: We've all done things that are bad examples of Christ.

David: Right, and we feel horrible about them,
but we don't know how to fix them.
And sometimes, you know, you're no longer in the parish
or the people have moved out of town
and they're away and you're like, how?
You know, what happened to these people?
They just kind of fell through the cracks
and, you know, it would be so good
to just kind of clear the air.

Peter: I'm reminded of a time in my ministry up in Minnesota
when I sat across the table from a woman in the congregation
who had been deeply hurt by a previous pastor.
And I knew going into that conversation
that I was gonna kind of take one for the team.

David: Yeah.

Peter: It was the first time I had a finger wagged
right up in my nose.

David: Wow.

Peter: About this guy who preceded me by a couple pastors.
And it was kind of this moment where I felt like,
you're right, Jessica, I think that we all fall short
sometimes,

but this text is really talking about the leaders of the church.

David: Right.

Peter: And there is a word when pastors should acknowledge that we are not, we don't always adorn the office with the holy life.

David: Right.

Right.

Peter: Or with kind of a perfect servant heart or action.

David: Right.

Or we're not always not easily angered.

Peter: Right.

David: Right.

Peter: Right.

And which makes me think this text in some ways, this text is an interesting text to preach on a Sunday morning because I think, you know, they often say, I often say, when I teach this stuff, how the text impacts you is one angle you might follow for how it would impact other people.

But in this case.

David: In this case, right.

Peter: This text is different for pastors and church leaders than it would be, I think, for people who aren't in that position.

David: Right.

Right.

Because when I've messed up and I know I've messed up and there's been people who are out there who are no longer in the pew

because of those fractured relationships, this text gives me a vision of God who's going to come in and he's going to find them and he's going to care for them and he's going to bring them back.

And it's just a beautiful, there's a beautiful comfort there that is calling for some honesty in order for it to be comforting.

Peter: And I'm just thinking about preaching this text and it calls for some, it's comforting even to me as a pastor knowing that God is able to overcome my failures.

David: Right.

Peter: But it's a different comfort for me.

David: Right.

Peter: So I would think of it for me as a pastor, it comforts me because God forgives my failures. For people who are hurt by a pastor, it's not like they need to be forgiven for the hurt their pastor caused them.

David: Right.

Peter: It's more of a rescue or deliverance that God is going to see to it.

David: Yeah.

Peter: And so there's a different malady.

David: Right, there's a different malady but the tender care that you have here.
And you know, when I first read it, I was kind of like, you know, I read it and I'm like, it's a really beautiful text,
but it's basically Psalm 23 and you know, how often do we need to hear about Psalm 23?
I mean, obviously, really often, but I'm like, maybe I'll look at the other text.
But then I thought, well, let me read the context.
And I read the context and I'm like, oh my gosh, yeah, there's some stuff here that's heavy and it's hard, but I think it would be helpful.
I'm kind of curious, Jessica, if you heard a sermon from a preacher who is kind of in a way acknowledging that pastors don't have it always perfectly together, how would that shape your view of the pastor, your relationship with the pastor?
How would you hear that kind of message?

Jessica: If he didn't say that, I think he was a liar.
If pastors think that acting perfect fools us, they're wrong. We're all human.
You know, certainly there's a respect for the office. But let's be honest, nobody should pretend like they're perfect, any of us Christians.

David: Right, yeah.

Peter: Well, I think part of this too is, I appreciate when you mentioned your aunt, David, because most people probably don't think of their current pastor as their only pastoral connection they've ever had.

David: Right.

Peter: You know, there's previous pastors that we've all had. There are pastors in other church bodies that we've had and that's really been an offense to a lot of people.

David: Right, yeah.

Peter: And so that...

David: And what's interesting is part of the offense is that there's not honesty about it.

Peter: Yeah.

David: Right?
You know, I mean, it's tragic and it's horrible, but it's even worse when you try to hide it.

Peter: Right.

David: When you read the text, you know, when you read the chapter before,
God is like right out in the open about what his people, what his pastors have done.
You know, this is what they've done.
This passage is a passage that, you know, has such a strong, powerful view of a loving God who is seeking those people that are on the roster still but are not there,

that it gives you the freedom, the ability, the safe space
to kind of just confess your own errors in the presence of
such a mighty God
and to trust as we walk together in the future
that we're going to try to seek to be the type of pastors
and be the type of people that God desires.

Peter: When you think about judgment and the last son of the church
here,
you know, it is appropriate to think about your own need to
be delivered and saved.

David: Right.

Peter: And our own ways in which we need the forgiveness of Jesus.
Man, I think I just want to preach on your text this week,

David,

because this is really an opportunity.

David: Well, it's hard. I mean, it's scary, though. It's scary,
right?

Peter: It's scary, but it's an opportunity to be very authentic and
to be transparent
and to speak in a way that almost lets down the guard a
little bit
and yet not too focused on you or pastors.
Because of the beautiful, tender imagery of God doing this,
there's a really natural way you could acknowledge where
we've fallen short as clergy
and yet have it be totally gospel-driven with the language of
the text.

David: Right.

Jessica: And certainly everybody has seen other clergy fall.
Maybe not you and your parish, but you think of like the
televangelists.
How many of those have crumbled in my lifetime with terrible
scandals?
So it's not like you're going to tell them something that
they don't know.
They need to hear that the real shepherd is not just like the
other shepherds.

David: Right.

Well, and then, you know, how far he goes.
You know, they've been scattered and he's going to find the
places where they've crawled
and he's going to rescue them.
And really, it's a beautiful imagery.
Wow.

Peter: Yeah.

Jessica: Peter, what would you preach on?

Peter: All right, I'm taking a little bit different tack.
Psalm 95 is a song of joy.

David: Oh, there we go. Okay.

I must have been in a good mood when I was looking at these
texts.

Jessica, would you begin by reading just verse 1 and 2 of
Psalm 95?

Jessica: 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 to him with songs of praise.

Peter: All right, I hear this first couple of verses and I think of this Psalm as an invitation to rejoice, an invitation to sing, to praise, to make this joyful noise. And as I was thinking about this invitation, I couldn't help but think of the many reasons we have not to rejoice today, right? You take the kind of stuff we just talked about with Ezekiel 34, with the failure of the church in various ways. You look at the state of the country, whatever happens to be going on in politics or the economy. You think about our families. You look at the statistics of people who wandered away, the brokenness of homes. And I think about so many reasons not to rejoice. So I'm thinking about this Psalm calls us to rejoice in a way that flows from God's work. So the works of God lead those who trust in him to rejoice. Rather than telling people to rejoice then, proclaim the works of God that cause joy.

Jessica: I love the distinction you've made in the past too about, don't tell me I should be joyful, give me the reasons why I should be joyful. Because otherwise rejoicing is still just another to-do on my list of laws I have to fulfill.

Peter: Yeah, and that's a real serious problem. You don't want to burden people with now on top of everything else, rejoice even though things are really awful.

David: So you issue the invitation, come rejoice. I'm kind of like, well, let me wait until I get this stuff fixed. Wait until my family's better, wait until my job's better, wait until... Then I'll come and rejoice with you, but right now is not the time.

Peter: Yeah, there's some things need to get fixed first before I'll allow joy to be part of my life. So I think there's a couple of things here. One in verse 6, Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker, the one who made us. And I think about the intimacy of, of course, like an image like the potter and the clay comes to mind. But the one who has made us, the one who has fashioned us, the one who has formed us, the one who decided the world needs a Jessica and the world needs a Dave.

David: Oh, man. You have to argue about that.

Peter: So he's our maker, and if we ever question whether or not he's our maker,

we can just look around at the psalm invites, just look around at the creation around us, you know, in his hands of the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains, the sea is his, his hands form the dry land. All of this is the creation of the one who has made each and every one of us.

David: I love that line, the world needs a Peter. The world needs a...that is just, that is a great line. That could make a sermon.

Peter: Well, it could make it personal.

David: It does. Which is kind of ironic because the psalm is really big picture, you know, the sea, the mountains, the whole earth. Right.

Peter: And you kind of, oh, there was a great, there was a great event in a national youth gathering in Minneapolis a number of years ago. And it was, it was just incredible, the kids, there were 20,000 kids there, and they just, they found it really helpful.

It was a, it was a video of the earth and the stars and crashing waves, and the God who made all this, the God who made all of that, the God who's his power, also decided to make Carl.

Jessica: Yes, I was there, I saw those videos, those were fabulous. Yes, tell me more.

Peter: Yeah, and so it went back and forth to the God who, you know, makes volcanoes erupt, and the God who has done all these things, and the God who has lions running across the, the junk, whatever, also made Carl.

Jessica: And Carl is like this little nerdy guy.

Peter: Carl is this goofy kid with curly hair.

David: Oh, I love that. And he was interspersed with each thing with a line about, about how odd and unique and wonderfully quirky Carl is. You see, so that, yeah, so that line touched me, and that is something that I would definitely develop more, and let that be a good moment in the sermon.

So like the way you're talking about it, you know, that comparison contrast, and leading up to also made, and then the pause, and then the name.

Peter: So this, this first, this first reason we have to praise is that God made us. Our existence itself is, it's not grace in terms of kind of forgiveness, but it is a gift of God, the gift of life that He's given to each one of us. And so that would be one, one reason to rejoice or one piece of it. Then I love this phrase in verse one that you read earlier. Let's make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. The rock of our salvation. I love the stability and the strength.

It's probably why we like mighty fortress and all that kind of stuff.

But the rock of our salvation, the one who saves us, the one who is the rock, that's the one we're praising.

And so I think I'd want to make a connection to 1 Corinthians 15 here.

Jesus as the first fruits of our, of the resurrection.

The one who promises us that we will be raised on the last day too.

And so you could even make some allusion to the reading from Matthew if you want to.

David: I'd probably go with the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.

Peter: Yeah, you know that this. Sure, yeah.

David: Yeah, yeah. So the rock imagery of Christ and linking that to salvation.

Peter: So, I mean, that's where, of course, with every psalm, it's a little bit tricky to know how to preach Christ.

David: Right.

Peter: Because he's usually not mentioned by name.

But this would be one where rock of our salvation just invites Jesus as a central piece of it.

And so then there's, so he's our maker, he's the rock of our salvation.

And then even just the first, well, I guess the second verse, let us come into his presence with thanksgiving.

He's a God who invites us into his presence.

That he invites us not for judgment, not for punishment, not for rebuke,

although those are all appropriate in various ways.

But he comes and invites us into his presence with thanksgiving.

And so he's a God who welcomes us.

I love the invitational language here because you think about the nature of an invitation.

I heard a guy speak about that this summer.

And he talked about an invitation is by nature, in its very essence, is a gift.

It's good news. I mean, you get invited to something that it tells,

when you're invited to something, you're told, I want you here.

I want you to be here.

And so I would kind of lean into this God as well.

He welcomes us. He invites us into his presence.

And so now I think in a way I wouldn't even talk much about rejoicing or praising,

as much as just proclaiming these wonderful things that then would lead to rejoicing, hopefully.

And I would have to deliver this sermon, I think, with some joy.

And to help people see how this has shaped me, and I hope it shapes you.

Jessica: I like that idea of inviting. I'm somebody who hates crashing parties.
If I'm not invited, I really feel weird going.
So I don't want to sneak into heaven and just be like,
well, I'm going to stand in the back and maybe no one will know that I'm here.
But that the Master actually invited me. That makes a big difference.

Peter: And there may be some people who feel like they kind of have to sneak into church,
where they don't maybe feel as welcomed or as if it's their place.
And this is a chance for you to say, you are welcome here.
You're welcome in the presence of God.

Jessica: That's all for today.
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I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau.
Join us next week here at Lectionary Kickstart when Dr. David Schmitt
and Dr. Peter Nafzger will spark your thoughts for next Sunday.

David: You got your collar on and people are drinking
and then they come over to you because you got your collar on. It's like a magnet.
And you know,