

“The Good Shepherd Never Fails Us”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian

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Scripture Readings

Ezekiel 34:1-6,11-16

John 10:7-11

Hymns/Songs

"This Is My Father's World" 143

"Fill My Cup, Lord" 604

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4l2yY2r95g>

"Open My Eyes, That I May See" 172

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDceaG7kFQA>

Ezekiel 34:1-6,11-16

Prophecy Against the Shepherds of Israel

34 The word of the LORD came to me: ²“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; ⁶they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

The Lord God will Seek them Out

¹¹“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹²As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been 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. ¹³And 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. ¹⁴I 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. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I 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. I will feed them in justice.

John 10:7-11

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Insight for Worship

Secrets of Heaven 2694 by Emanuel Swedenborg

“The Divine Providence is universal, but universal from the fact that it is in the very least things; in fact not even a hair falls from the head without God knowing it; that is, there is nothing so minute that it is not foreseen and accordingly provided for.”

SERMON: “The Good Shepherd Never Fails Us”

When you look back over your life, is it possible for you to take a guess at how many times you were in some kind of real trouble and yet somehow managed to get through it all right? And of those precarious moments of getting through without too many natural or spiritual bumps and bruises, were there times when it became clear to you that God came to your rescue? Ever experience some kind of Divine intervention, whether it be God Himself, one of His angels, or a kind, loving or wise human being who just *happened* to be there right when you needed them the most?

Well, I have. I’ve been helped out so many times in my life that this one fact alone was enough at one point in my life to convince me of the reality of God. I’ve been saved, for example, from feeling brokenhearted—devastated by betrayal. I’ve been saved from feeling terribly scattered in mind and spirit, when suddenly, from out of nowhere, I felt a divinely loving and oh so powerful Presence just pick me up in his or her arms and carry me spiritually to safety...clearing my mind...bringing me away from intense fear and worry—simply because I chose to center in, and pray.

I recall one time back in college when finals week was around the corner and I still had one major paper due in my Sociology class at Urbana University. It was a big assignment. I had contracted the flu a few weeks before and was barely on schedule with everything, and I felt extremely anxious! And so, I prayed. I prayed and asked God to help me. Well, the next morning I didn’t find my research paper finished and stapled on my desk, but what I did find was this almost eerie feeling of total peace and confidence about what I needed to accomplish. And so, I buckled down and went to work, and I remained focused and wound up getting an “A+” on that paper, and an “A” in the class—and Professor Larry Haverkos’ was tough.

Another example I have is from around 15 years ago, a case of Divine intervention, which a woman shared with me. One night she found herself suddenly staring death in the face. She was just about to get into her parked car in a Public Parking garage somewhere, and then suddenly a criminal ran up to her and pointed a gun at her, right at her face, and she thought for sure this was it! But then, again out of nowhere the Lord suddenly blessed her with an enormous, ALL-ENVELOPING feeling of peace. She **knew**, she **felt** that she would be fine, whether the criminal killed her or not. So, she just stared back at him, eye-to-eye, calm, steady...and then the gunman took off and didn't bother her again. The Good Shepherd came to her rescue and saved her from overwhelming fear and panic, and that lady swore to me it was God's Divine power and Presence that saved her that day.

These are but two examples of our Divine Good Shepherd, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, helping His flock when endangered. And if our national and local news reporters focused predominantly on good things happening in life, then we'd be amazed at how **CONSTANTLY** the Lord and the angels are working to help, support, heal and save us...time after time after time! These and other stories are so powerfully illustrative to me, which mesh beautifully with what Scripture and our theology reveal on this theme, that in the vast scheme of things the Lord has **EVERYTHING** under control. And, that whether we're being helped magnificently by an angel, or if we're going through a rough patch of life, we are assured that God will shepherd us through. As we read earlier: "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all

New Church theology teaches a great deal about God's Divine spiritual government or Providence in life. I find this passage especially revealing:

"The Divine Providence is universal, but universal from the fact that it is in the very least things; in fact not even a hair falls from the head without God knowing it; that is, there is nothing so minute that it is not foreseen and accordingly provided for." (Secrets of Heaven 2694)

I believe this is true about the awesome government of the Lord, how He sustains us, guides us and comforts us when we're really in trouble. The truth is that God cares greatly for all of your physical, emotional and spiritual needs in life, way beyond our ability to fathom in fact! Just as a loving shepherd cares for his flock of sheep, so does the Lord care for your life, for my life...for EVERYONE'S life, always. As our harvesting time of thanksgiving for all of God's blessings shines before us, this is what I'm most thankful for this year in 2021, which I'm sharing with you today, in part,

to “prime your spiritual pumps” to help you focus in more deeply on ***what you are most thankful for these past twelve months***: for me, I’m most thankful for how the Lord is constantly on the job helping the sheep of His flock (you and me) toward safety when we’re in spiritual and natural peril in life.

And it is out of His benevolent care that the Lord provides wise, loving human shepherds too in the religious-spiritual leaders, who serve the church. For thousands of years God has continued to raise up faithful spiritual shepherds to lead in religion and the good way of life. But, even though God calls men and women into His service, this does not mean that we all remain faithful and good. The freedom of the clergy to stain the vestments that we wear is constantly at play. In fact, as one retired minister once shared with me, he believes that the devilish spirits in Hell love nothing more than to corrupt those who lead many others. Across the board I’ve heard of pastors and priests who fall to the enticements of sin.

In Ezekiel’s time, around 580 years before Jesus was born, where he lived in exile with many Jews away in the northeastern region of Babylon, the sinners being chastised were the kings and priests of Judah and Israel.

As we read in *2 Kings 13:10*, “In the thirty-seventh year of Joash the king of Judah, Jehoash the son of Jehoahaz became king over Israel in Samaria...and he did evil in the sight of the Lord.” And as we read today in worship:

“Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.” (Ezekiel 34:2b-4)

It was, in part, because of the severe priestly and political sin in ancient Israel that God knew that He Himself must come in the flesh to save the lost and scattered sheep on Earth. While there clearly were some very good and faithful clergy, one among them being Ezekiel, in general humanity’s spiritual leadership was covered in darkness—thus the need for the virgin birth was set in motion.

God came here as one of us, in His Divine-Humanity, as Christ. The Lord did not incarnate to whisk all evil and untruth out of the world, but instead to make sure He Himself could forever come to us in His Divine-Humanity. He came to make sure that when anyone needs a very heartfelt and visible Presence of the Infinite in life, that in Christ our need may be fulfilled. He came to re-establish spiritual balance, but also so

that the Lord Himself could magnify His full ability to reach us, especially when we're feeling lost and forlorn. In *Ezekiel* 34:11-12 we read: "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been 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.

Spiritually speaking, in the more internal aspects of what makes up a human being, in a similar sense we're all dealing with a mixture of good and evil impulses within us, light and darkness inside of us and around us—thus the reason for Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares. On earth we're living in between Heaven and Hell, as Swedenborg so notably put it.

In the veiled landscape of the human spirit our own thoughts and affections can play the part of the bad, irresponsible shepherd, which may try at times to confuse and scare the good feelings and loves in us away (represented by the sheep in this lesson). At times, the leadership within our minds may become severely corrupt and bent on selfishness.

Indeed, one of us may find ourselves in spiritual exile inside at times, experiencing a time of long-term doubt or disbelief in God—a time of "vastation," perhaps because of having to withstand far too many heartbreaks, traumas or pain in life. Or, someone you deeply care for may be terribly lost within, whereupon his or her own deep affections for God and love for others are scattered, broken, and have become food for the beasts of the heart. *In our finite human perception things may seem to us that all hope is lost.* **But, my friends, THAT is NEVER, EVER the case.** And so, this Thanksgiving Season, I give thanks that the Lord is here, very ready to help us when we feel overwhelmed or downright afraid. He is here, dwelling inside of His holy Word, able to speak to our hearts and minds in both the literal and symbolic depths of Scripture.

In conclusion, the Lord has many ways of actively pursuing and coming after anyone who is lost or broken! Jesus spoke to this lovingly when He said: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'" (Luke 15:4-6) God will always activate and send us His great and mighty angel warriors, who know exactly what to do to help you and to save you...one day at a time! Amen.

LET US PRAY...