

**+ Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23-24 + The King Shepherds His Flock +
+ Last Sunday of End Time: Christ the King + 23 November 2014 +**

What makes a king a king? Is it the crown on his head? The scepter in his hand? The throne on which he sits? If that were the case, then whoever happens to be wearing the crown, holding the scepter or sitting on the throne would be king at any given moment. Is it the blood coursing through his veins carrying the DNA of royalty throughout his body? Even that doesn't necessarily make a king a king—as royal families with multiple children know all too well. Only one can be king.

Is it the armed forces that obey his commands or the way that people—young and old—honor him? Such obedience and honor may merely be show—as many a deposed or executed ruler has discovered too late. Is it the love and respect people show for him or the fear of his judgment? While nearly every ruler wants to be loved and respected, fear only makes tyrants.

So what makes a king a king? Back in the ancient days of the Old Testament, Near Eastern kings wanted to be identified not just as powerful rulers, but as caring shepherds. Yes, they were mighty and wealthy, but they also wanted people to think that they cared about the average citizen as a shepherd cared for his sheep. Were they successful? Not usually, although good kings were often known as “shepherds of the people”.

In ancient Israel, however, they had a real example of a shepherd-king. About 400 years before the prophet Ezekiel penned the words of our text, a young shepherd from Bethlehem became king of Israel. At first glance, you wouldn't have expected the young man to even be a ruler. He was the runt of the litter—youngest in a family of strapping boys. He was gifted and strong, but that's not what made him such a beloved king.

No, David was literally a shepherd. He had spent much of his youth tending his father's flocks, sleeping out in the pastures, caring for the lambs and sheep, and defending them against dangerous weather and deadly animals. So when the Lord made him the shepherd of God's people, his experience with his flocks translated beautifully to how he ruled Israel. Combine that with David's tremendous trust in his Lord and you had the Shepherd-King by which all other Israelite kings would be measured. Long after David died, the Lord used David's example to call Israel's kings to account and to lift the eyes of God's people to the coming of a descendant of David who would be an even greater Shepherd-King.

That leads us to today—the last Sunday of this Christian church year, which is typically known as “Christ the King” Sunday. Today we praise our eternal and gracious King of kings who rules over all things for our good and will bring us to the glories of heaven someday. We get a glimpse of that glory and majesty in 1 Corinthians 15, where the Apostle Paul describes the Last Day. On that day, Christ the King will carry out his judgment on all people, humiliate death once and for all, and make all things new for all eternity.

Truly such a description leaves no doubt that Christ Jesus is a king, but Jesus ruling in glory and majesty isn't the only way we see him as King today. Through the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, the Lord describes what makes a king a king, specifically what makes Christ our king.

The **“shepherds of Israel”**—their political rulers and religious leaders—had failed God's people miserably (Ezekiel 34:2). They were taking advantage of God's people living luxuriously on their hard labor. They had long ago abandoned the dirty, difficult work of caring for the poor and the helpless, the weak and the lost. They were harsh and brutal and had scattered God's people.

So the Lord God in his grace decided to do something about it. If those who had come after David, his chosen shepherd-king, were failing his people miserably, then he—the King of the universe—would have to shepherd his people himself. He would do what those **“shepherds”** would not. He would be the Shepherd-King that his people so desperately needed. He would be the Shepherd-King that we still desperately need today as we see every one of these descriptions fulfilled in Christ our Savior-King.

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep.” Isn't it amazing that Jesus watches over you and watches out for you? He's the ruler of the universe. It is his responsibility to make sure that the heavenly bodies don't collide with one another, even while making sure that there is a proper amount of sunshine, precipitation, oxygen, and food to sustain the lives of billions of people and countless plants and animals on this planet. Yet even while watching over these “big” things, Jesus devotes his attention to watching over you—to guiding the details of your life for your eternal good, to defending you from unseen danger, to providing you the amount of blessing that he knows you need, to being ever-present in your life.

Pretty amazing, right? You could even say that such devoted care for every one of us is the mark of a true Shepherd-King, but there's more. ***"I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land... I will tend them in a good pasture... There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down..."*** Isn't it amazing how Jesus cares for you? When you're afraid, he calms your fear. When you grieve, he dries your tears. When you are in danger, he rescues you. Just think of how he guided history—every last detail—to use his Holy Spirit to bring you to faith in him. He called you to faith through his saving Gospel bringing you to the ***"rich pasture"*** of his gracious love, where he now nourishes you with his Word and the sweet morsels of his forgiveness and mercy, his peace and comfort and grace. He nourishes you with his own body and blood for your forgiveness and life in his Supper. With him, you have no need to fear. You can rest in peace.

Pretty amazing, isn't it? Christ the King provides for his sheep, but he does even more to show us why he is our King. ***"I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice."*** If the ***"shepherds of Israel"*** were harsh and brutal to God's people, he is the exact opposite. Jesus cares about the lost and those who stray far from him. Jesus cares about souls—yours, mine, every one of ours. Jesus knows how our sinful natures so willingly wander far away from him seeking after the next tuft of temptation. Yet he spares no time, no effort in seeking us and bringing us back to his flock. He spares no time, no effort in seeking others to join us as well, but he doesn't just bring us back to his flock. No, he ***"binds up the injured and strengthens the weak..."***

About 150 years before Ezekiel wrote these words, the Lord put similar words in the mouth of our Shepherd-King. ***"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom to the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God..."*** (Isaiah 61:1-2) Jesus would later publicly affirm these words during his time here on earth. He came to heal our hearts broken by sin, to shatter the chains of our captivity to sin, death, and the devil, to strengthen our weak hearts with the good news of God's faithful and gracious favor.

Yet this same Shepherd-King will come to judge the living and the dead. ***"...The sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice."*** Christ is our gracious Savior, yet also the holy God who will punish the proud and unrepentant. He will condemn those who reject him and those who see no need for him to eternal death in hell. Now that's terrifying, yet we need not fear. Our Shepherd-King cares for every one of us, and the justice he carries out on our behalf is based on his own sacrifice for the sheep, justice based on the grace and mercy of Christ our Substitute.

You see, as amazing as all these ways are that demonstrate how Christ is our Shepherd-King, nothing demonstrated that more than when our Shepherd became the Lamb of sacrifice for your sins and mine. The Shepherd gave his life for his sheep. The King gave his life for his people whom he so dearly loved though we deserved it not. In fact, Matthew paints that very picture of Christ our King as pagan soldiers mock Jesus—***"Hail, King of the Jews!"***—and then take him out to be lifted up on a cross to die. (Matthew 27:27-31)

How can a bloody Savior be our King of kings? See it in the love he demonstrates for you by willingly going to that cross to die for you. See it in the love he demonstrates for you by willingly allowing his blood to be shed to pay for every one of your sins. See it in the love he demonstrates for you by willingly suffering God's punishment for you that you might be declared "not guilty" and restored to the Lord's flock once again.

It is Christ, that Royal Son of Heaven, whom God "lifts up" to be the ***"one shepherd"*** over his people. It is Christ, that descendant of David, who proves to be David's Lord and our Shepherd-King. ***"I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken."***

See how Christ watches over you and provides for you. See how Christ cares for you and helps you. See how Christ rules all things for you and above all, loves you even to the point of sacrificing his life for you. All that, my friends, is what makes Christ our King. Rejoice in your Shepherd-King every day of your life here and forever in his heavenly kingdom. Amen!