

26 November 2017
Last Sunday of the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Come, our David! Come, Good Shepherd! Come, Lord Jesus!”
Text: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, 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 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. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land.

How good the words of the prophet Ezekiel must have sounded to the people of Israel. For they had been scattered. Babylon had come in and trampled them and their country. The Temple had been destroyed, Jerusalem burned to the ground, and its walls lay in ruins. And the people? A few had been left behind, some had fled to Egypt, but many had been taken as prisoners to Babylon. It was, as Ezekiel said, a time of **clouds and thick darkness** for the people. A time when it seemed as if God didn't see and didn't care. That God had forsaken them.

And while Babylon may have been home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, it was not a place Israel wanted to be. It was a strange land, with a strange culture, a strange language, and strange gods. They were like fish out of water there. It was uncomfortable. Maybe they were even repulsed by what they saw.

Maybe like you. For maybe your life has gone places this year you didn't want it to go. Or maybe it didn't go where you hoped. Maybe looking around at our society, at our culture, you feel more and more uncomfortable with the way things are going . . .

For example, some of you are old enough to remember a time when the culture was not so opposed to the Christian truth and when Biblical stories were more broadly known. It wasn't too long ago when the only pronouns we needed were “he” and “she” and gay meant happy. And who thought we'd see the day when Nativity Scenes and saying Merry Christmas could be considered hate speech. It is more and more a strange and uncomfortable land we are living in. Not because we have been taken to Babylon; but because Babylon has come to us.

It was actually started that way for Israel, too, at first. For long before they had been taken to Babylon, Babylon had come to them. But instead of resisting, Israel began to adopt the ways and even the gods of the people around them instead of remaining steadfast in the biblical truth. So God caused His people to be conquered and hauled off. He didn't just allow it, He *caused* it. Divine discipline. That a drastic change in their world and life would help them see the change that had crept into their own lives as well.

And again, us too. While we may bemoan the fact that the church doesn't have more influence in our culture, we should ask why it doesn't have more influence in our own lives. While we criticize the immorality of the culture, we should ask why we have grown so indifferent to sexual activity outside of marriage, easy divorce, hyper-sexualized movies, TV, and internet, and if we have capitulated to the rejection of how God created us male and female. We wonder why the Bible has been banished from the public square without even realizing how we have perhaps banished it in our own lives - how little we ourselves read it and know it. And while it is sometimes said we are living in a godless society, that's not true - we are living in a society *filled* with gods. False ones. Living in our hearts, too. All those people and things we put before God. All those people and things we fear, love, and trust more than Him.

Do you see it? How Babylon has not only come to us but lives in us.

So it really wouldn't do much good to just bring a corrupt Israel back, would it? To take them out of Babylon. They needed to have Babylon taken out of them. And so 70 years you will live there, God said. The gods you want will be the gods you have. The life you want will be the life you have. So they would realize: this life, these gods, are not good at all, before it was too late. So they would repent. Us too.

For the day is coming, Ezekiel said, when God will come and search for His sheep. Wherever they are, He will find them, for He knows them. They were banished but not forsaken. Disciplined but not hated. And He will rescue them. He will gather them, feed them, tend to them and strengthen them, and give them rest. Good pasture under a Good Shepherd. My servant David, Ezekiel says, shall do it.

Now certainly these are good and hopeful words! But the mention of David makes them even moreso. For David and his son Solomon reigned when Israel was at its largest, strongest, wealthiest, and most glorious. It sounds like God is going to bring back the glory days of Israel!

But not quite. You see, when Ezekiel proclaimed these words, David had been dead and buried some 400 years already. No, this David was going to be a different David, His kingdom a different kind of kingdom, and His glory a different kind of glory. If you were looking for and expecting the old kind of kingdom, re-glorified, you'd be disappointed. This was going to be new. All new. A new king and a new kingdom, a new heavens and a

new earth, for people made new, too. A rescue from both the Babylon *without* and the Babylon *within*.

And while Israel was brought back from their Babylon after 70 years, that was not primarily the rescue Ezekiel was talking about. The rescue He was talking about, under the David he was talking about, our David, the Son of David, came later. When this promised one was born in the city of David, which you know as Bethlehem. That Babylon live in us no more, but than He live in us. He and His Spirit of life. *Depart, unclean spirit, and make way for the Holy Spirit*, we say in our Baptismal liturgy, and we pray as we confess our sins.

And He did - this Good Shepherd came into this old kingdom to create a new one. He came into our captivity to free us from it. He fought our sin, death, and hell, let Babylon have its way with Him, and laid down His life for us. That there be not just a new kingdom, but a new you, crucified and risen with your Saviour, with a new and clean heart, and a new spirit. That though I may still live in Babylon, Babylon no longer live in me.

And He is still coming, rescuing still, our David. He knows the influence of Babylon is strong, and the evil one persistent. That still today we are bombarded with false gods and false truths and false goods every day, seeking to change the way we think, the way we act, and the way we worship. The evil one still tempting, and all the more as the time grows short, as the Last Day draws ever closer.

Or maybe to put this coming, this rescue, in the words we heard in the Holy Gospel today, the reading from Matthew, we could put it this way:

We are hungry and He gives us food - His very body to eat.

We are thirsty and He gives us drink - His very blood to drink.

When we were estranged from Him by sin or turn away from Him - He welcomes us in grace.

When we are naked and exposed by our sin - He clothes us with His righteousness.

We who are sick with the poison of sin He visits with the medicine of forgiveness.

And we who are in prison to death He came to in His own death to set us free with His resurrection.

All this that Babylon live no longer in us, but that He live in us. He and His Spirit of life. That on the Day of His return, when He comes to put an end to our Babylon, we won't be sad that we're losing all this - we will rejoice to see Him. For we have been waiting for Him, looking for Him, clinging to Him - not the things of this world.

Yet even more, He will rejoice to see us. For whether or not we are waiting for the Last Day with the same excitement as we wait for Christmas Day, He is. He rejoiced to come

and save us on that first Christmas Day, and He will rejoice when He comes to gather His flock on the Last Day. For you are His joy. It is you the Good Shepherd loves more than anything else in this world. It is you that He wants to be with Him forever. He wants the sheep-side of the judgment to be overflowing, and the goat-side to be empty.

And really, isn't that joy how it will be if it's not Babylon living in us, but He and His Spirit, He and His joy, He and His love, living in us? And instead of clinging to the things of this world, we'll look to our neighbor instead? And help him as the one who lives in us helps us?

So it's not doing those things Jesus talked about in the Gospel that gets us out of Babylon and earns us a place in the kingdom - it's getting Babylon out of us and Jesus into us that makes the difference. That makes His life our life, His love our love, and His joy our joy.

And you may not even realize it. Just as we may not realize the influence of Babylon in our hearts and minds, so too we will say: *Lord, when did we see you and do all these things for you?* But Jesus knows, and sees. And though we may consider what we do - our sins or our good - as little, He doesn't. So He died for our sins, all of them; and He rejoices in our good, all of it.

Those who want Babylon and its gods, Babylon and its gods they will have. The Last Day will be a Judgment Day.

But when your Good Shepherd is the Judge and you are a sheep of His flock, that day holds no fear, only joy. That Day is like Christmas Day, when the wraps come off, what is hidden is revealed, and what everyone wishes for at Christmas is finally true - there is peace. No more sin, no more evil, no more death. No more sadness, no more separation . . . and if there are tears, they are only of joy.

How good those words sound - now - to us. As we wait for our David to come, to put an end to our Babylong, as we wait for His kingdom. And while we wait we pray: *Thy kingdom come*. And it is a two-fold prayer. Both that our David, the Son of David, Jesus, would come and put an end to Babylon and establish His kingdom; but also that He would come *now*. That He would come now and root Babylon out of us and out of all people. It is our prayer that on the Last Day, the sheep-side be overflowing, and the goat-side be empty.

And Jesus is answering that prayer. And so He comes today. He spoke to you His Absolution, and He will feed You with His Body and Blood. That you live in Him and He in you. A new life, with a new Spirit, that starts now and will never end.

And so we pray: *Thy kingdom come*. Yes, come, our David! Come, Good Shepherd! Come, Lord Jesus!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.