

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday in Advent, Nov. 29, 2009

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Hymns: 436, 44: 1-2, 158, 416, 51.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Lessons: Psalm 23, Revelation 7:13-17, John 10: 1-18.

Text: Hebrews 11: 4 and Hebrews 12: 22-24

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Much of scripture is addressed to people who were very familiar with nature, livestock, crops, and land used for agriculture. We come from a different world than many of the writers of the Scriptures. Most of us probably have very little experience around sheep. But I'd like to take a look at Shepherds with you in this Advent Season. Many shepherds found in scripture look forward to the shepherd and bishop of our souls, Jesus Christ. All of the shepherds we will look at in the coming weeks have some special connection to Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Good Shepherd.

The four shepherds that you will have opportunity to hear about were God's servants to point the way to Jesus Christ, the shepherd who gave his life for the sheep that loved to wander.

In our Old Testament lesson you heard from David, a shepherd himself, who said "The Lord is my shepherd." It is as though he boasted: look at who my shepherd is – my owner – my manager! It is the Lord who created all things, sustains all things, and sent his Son to redeem me, a poor wandering sheep. David knew firsthand that the lot in life of any particular sheep depended on the type of man who owned it. Some men were gentle, kind, intelligent, brave and selfless in their devotion to their sheep. Under one man sheep would struggle, starve, and suffer endless hardship. In another's care they would flourish and thrive contentedly.

Today, let's talk about

ABEL – A SHEPHERD WHO BELIEVED IN GOD

- 1. The role of shepherds in the Old Testament.**
- 2. Jesus is the ultimate shepherd.**
- 3. Abel.**
- 4. How the New Testament relates Abel to Christ.**

What did a shepherd do? He cared for the sheep. Sometimes they were sheep he personally owned; sometimes he did it for sheep belonging to someone else.

Equipment typically carried by Biblical shepherds often included both a stick and a staff. The stick was the rod mentioned in our Old Testament lesson, which was about a yard or a meter long with a knob on one end. The staff is the "shepherd's crook," that looked somewhat like a modern long cane. He also carried a cloak that was also used for night-time bedding and a bag often made of a full goat's skin, with legs tied, in which was carried food or other items. A shepherd also often had a sling – a sling-shot – for defending himself and the flock against wild animals and sometimes a musical instrument such as a flute for entertaining himself and the sheep.

There were nomadic shepherds who owned flocks and herds, lived in tents and moved from place to place to find pasture for their cattle and sheep. There were also wealthy sheep owners who lived in towns while their flocks were driven from pasture to pasture by their servants. There was also the settled shepherd who led the flock from the permanent fold – the pen – the place where they were kept overnight, to the pasture in the morning and in the evening brought the flock home again. If the owner of the sheep didn't take care of them himself, this work was often committed to a son or a daughter or a hired servant. The shepherd was usually responsible to the owner for any loss of sheep but the laws given by God to Moses relieved him of responsibility if he could prove that the loss was not due to his neglect.

The shepherd went to the fold in the morning where often several flocks were kept and called out. His own sheep knew his voice and followed him. The sheep which belonged to other owners or were under the care of other shepherds paid no attention to the strange voice. The shepherd led his own flock to pasture, spent the day with them, and sometimes also the night with them. He defended them from wild beasts and robbers and kept the restless sheep from trespassing on cultivated ground. He searched for sheep who strayed and brought them back. The sheep often had their own names. The shepherd was responsible for finding food for the sheep, too.

Jesus Christ, the son of God and son of Mary, is the ultimate shepherd and is the good shepherd, as you heard him tell us in the gospel lesson. He was foretold often in the old Testament, such as Matthew records when the wise men went to Jerusalem seeking the king of the Jews: ***“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”*** Matthew 2:6.

Peter in his first letter also speaks of Jesus as a sheep who suffered. He closes this section speaking of believers like straying sheep: ***“But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”*** 1 Peter 2:20-25.

Jesus, called both the Lamb of God and the shepherd of the sheep, the sheep being all believers of all time, is spoken of in our epistle lesson: ***“For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*** Revelation 7:17.

Abel is the first shepherd of the Bible. We read in Genesis 4:2 that after Eve had her first son, Cain, ***“Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.”***

What makes him significant are the following words from Genesis 4:3-10: ***“In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let's go out to the field.” And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don't know,” he replied. “Am I my brother's keeper?” The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.””***

Although Abel was by no means sinless, for scripture plainly teaches in Romans 3:23 that ***“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”*** he surely didn’t deserve to be murdered – by his brother yet! So we might say that “innocent” Abel was killed by someone who should have taken care of him – his older brother. That makes us think of Jesus. Jesus was killed by those who should have honored him as the promised Messiah, the Son of God.

As the second child born to Adam and Eve, we can be sure that Abel’s parents had high hopes for him, perhaps wondering if he would be the promised Savior, just as mothers and fathers ever since always have high hopes for their children. Eve probably had no clue that several thousand years would pass before God, in his right time, would give mankind the promised Savior. We read in Galatians 4:4-5 ***“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.”*** The Savior didn’t come when humans first needed him. He came in God’s good time. Many hard times had to come upon the children of men – even upon the chosen tribe that would produce the Savior from their bloodlines.

As terrible as the death of Abel was, it is so much more terrible that the Son of God was killed. Terrible, yes, because an innocent – truly innocent man was executed, murdered. But it is joyous, blessed, happy and beneficial for mankind because through this murder God gives life – eternal life to all who believe in that Jesus Christ as Savior. The death of the second man had a blessed effect for all mankind.

The New Testament relates Abel to Christ through two different verses, both in Hebrews. Notice how Abel is the first of the cloud of many witnesses whose faith is spoken of in Hebrews. ***“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.”*** Hebrews 11:1-4.

It was faith that led Abel to offer a better sacrifice to God than his brother did. Genesis speaks of the first fruits he brought to give to God. He didn’t give just any old gift or leftovers: it was the firstfruits, the best!

Abel’s blood was spilled because of the specific sin of murder. His brother Cain murdered him. But Jesus’ blood speaks a better word, a word of salvation to believers. We read in Hebrews 12:22-24: about Jesus and his blood: ***“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”***

By faith, you, too, have come ***“to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant.”*** Jesus is the mediator, the middle man who arranged a new covenant or agreement between God and man. Man believes and God gives – gives life and salvation. That blood of Jesus is your only hope, but it is also your confidence because Jesus did everything for your salvation. Jesus is your shepherd like you heard from Psalm 23.

We conclude with these words from Hebrews 13:20-21: ***“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”***