

They Are My People

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 December 2020

[0 : 0 0] joy to bring God's word to you today. A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats but because we're following Jesus together as one community and as we follow Jesus together we become convinced there's no one so good that they don't need God's grace and no one so bad that they can't have it. So we believe that God has something to say to everyone in his word which is why we come back week after week and open it up and look what God has to say to us. We are still in the book of Zechariah as we're coming to our last Sunday in Advent. You remember that Advent comes from a Latin word that means to come or to arrive and in the season of Advent we take a special focus on Jesus coming and arriving to earth which means that we do two things. We celebrate that he came in the past. We also look forward and long for his coming in the future and as I've been telling you this is really what we do in all of the Christian life. We celebrate what God's doing in the past. We look forward to what he's going to do in the future. We live faithfully now in the present in light of both of those things. As we come to the book of Zechariah together I invite you to turn with me. We're in chapter 13 now. We left off in verse 1 of chapter 13 last week and now we're skipping to verse 7 and you'll remember that Zechariah was a prophet who went to the nation of Israel in the 6th century and he prophesied after the nation of Israel had returned from exile in Babylon and this is a collection of his prophecies and so just like a collection of sermons would cover a variety of topics so a collection of prophecies is going to cover a variety of topics. We are in chapters 9 through 13 and the topic in those chapters is the coming or the future kingdom of God and we're looking at the four passages from Zechariah that are quoted in the New Testament and the passage this week is actually quoted by Jesus himself. We've seen a variety of things in Zechariah. Remember in chapter 9 we looked on the fact that Jesus was coming as a king on a donkey which meant that he was a humble king and a peaceful king. In Zechariah chapter 11 we look not at Jesus as king but as shepherd and we saw that we live in this world filled with bad shepherds and we also live in a world that filled with people who hate good shepherds and Jesus the rejected shepherd dies for the sake of his sheep. And then last week we looked on Zechariah chapter 12 and we saw that Jesus does two things.

He changes us and he cleanses us and he's able to do both of those things because of Jesus' death. This morning as we turn to chapter 13 we're going to look again at Jesus as our shepherd. Last time remember in Zechariah chapter 11 we looked at bad shepherds and good shepherds and we talked mostly about the fact that Jesus changes the narrative of the shepherd in that he dies for the sheep who reject him. And so we focus on that aspect but there's much more that Jesus does as a good shepherd.

He does not just lay down his life for the sheep as good as that is. He's also caring for the sheep. And so we're going to take a continued look at this. You could think of this as Jesus the shepherd part two on what it is that Jesus does to care for his sheep. What it is he does to protect them.

And remember we're also asking this question during Advent. How can we rejoice? That was the command we saw in chapter 9. How can the Advent season be something not that passes over us, that washes over us, that we're numb to because we've seen it so many times, but something that's fresh to us over and over again. Something that gives us joy and new life. And so it's with that that we turn now to read God's word again. I invite you to turn with me in your worship guide or near the end or on your phone or in your Bible. Regardless of where you turn, remember that this is God's word. And God tells us that his word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. In other words, he has not left us to stumble alone in the dark, but instead he's given us his word to show us the way to go. And so that's why we read now starting at verse 7. Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me, declares the Lord of hosts. Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. I will turn my hand against the little ones. Verse 8. In the whole land, declares the Lord, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one-third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire and refine them as one refines silver and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name and I will answer them.

I will say, they are my people and they will say, the Lord is my God. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we thank you that you are a faithful and good shepherd. And we thank you that one of the ways you shepherd us is by your word.

[5 : 05] And so we ask that you would do that this morning, that you would use your word in a powerful way among us here in this room and for those who are joining us over the live stream, that you would soften our hearts, that you would clear our minds, that you would unstop our ears and open our eyes, that we would be able to see and hear and believe and know and understand everything that is written about you in your word. We thank you that we have communion with you and we could ask these things, not because we have earned them, but because we ask them in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. I know that some of you are military historians of sorts, and you'll know that it's only recently military history that we've had snipers. It's a recent development in part, you know, recently.

Guns have not been around that long, but even after guns came in, they weren't necessarily accurate enough to be able to do what people can do today. But if you're aware, you know that sort of the beginning of modern snipers could be traced back to the Revolutionary War. Now, you could argue about this with me if you want. I'm happy for you to do that. I'm happy for you even to win.

Could go back, and this was because the American troops had a strategy that was new and very frustrating to the British, and that was that they would choose officers, pick them out, and shoot them before they would shoot other people. They would make them special targets, and this was very frustrating because it was understood this was not what you were supposed to do. If there was anyone that you did not shoot among your enemies, it was the officers. This was understood as this rule of war that they were not to be touched. Americans didn't care. They did what they wanted. It turned out to be an effective strategy because, of course, if you strike the officers, what happens? You lose your leader.

You lose the one commanding and leading. If you're a Star Wars fan, you know this as well. Episode three, revenge of the Sith. What is the Sith's revenge? Well, Anakin goes to the Jedi temple, right, and he takes out the Jedi's. What happens afterwards? Fall of the Republic. What Anakin knows and what the revolutionary soldiers knew is also what we're told in this passage, verse seven, strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. Strike the Jedi, the Republic falls. Strike the officers, the British fall. Here, strike the shepherd of God's people and his sheep will be scattered. I will turn my hand against the little ones. Now, there's a principle here, and we don't have to work very hard to figure out what this means. Now, sometimes when it comes to prophecies, we have to do a little bit of digging to understand what exactly is being said. The reason we don't have to work hard on this one is Jesus himself makes it very clear for us. Twice we're told in the Gospels, Matthew chapter 26, verse 31,

[7 : 56] Mark chapter 14, verse 27. Jesus interprets this for us, and he interprets it about himself. He is the shepherd that is struck. His disciples who run away are the sheep who are scattered. And so Jesus applies it to his death, the scattering of his disciples. We're continuing here to see a repetition of what we've already seen in the previous chapters of Zechariah. Just like a good preacher, Zechariah is going to say the same thing over and over again. So Jesus' death, the shepherd, same thing we saw in chapter 9, right?

The humble king, part of the way he's humble is that he dies for his sheep. Zechariah 11, the shepherd, why is he a good shepherd? Why is he a better shepherd than we deserve? He dies for his sheep.

Zechariah chapter 12, what does it mean that he's the one who's pierced? It means that he's died for his sheep. And so we have here a review of everything we've seen before. We have something new, however, that has not been highlighted previously. Remember, I skipped the beginning of chapter 7 here. I jumped to the end. The beginning is this, awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me, declares the Lord of hosts. In other words, God is the one who declares that his shepherd needs to be struck. And this isn't just any shepherd. Here it's my shepherd, the one who stands next to me. The idea here is that this is someone who's with God, equal to God.

This isn't just any shepherd. It is God's close, intimate companion that he chooses to strike down. And of course, we know as Christians in the New Testament even clearer what's going on here, because we know that Jesus himself is God. And so that helps us understand why he's referred to as my shepherd, the one who stands next to him. And so the new piece here added to the shepherd from chapter 11 is that this was God's idea. It was God's plan and his purpose that his shepherd, his son Jesus, would be struck down. In fact, this is what we're told in the book of Acts. Peter, we've met Peter before, is preaching in Acts chapter 2, and he says this, This Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. You crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. Jesus' death, God's plan and foreknowledge, also the sin of men.

The point is this. Once again, Jesus dies for people who don't deserve them, deserve his death, and give them what they don't deserve. Jesus dies for people who don't deserve him, for these rebellious sheep. Remember, he's the rejected shepherd from Zechariah chapter 11, gives them what they don't deserve. However, the good shepherd does not just die for his sheep, and that's where we dig into this passage this morning. He also cares for his sheep.

[10 : 49] And so as we move from verse 7, we see two things, one in verse 8 and 9, and then one in verse 9 alone. The good shepherd here, he's going to refine his sheep, verses 8 and 9. He's going to refine his sheep.

He's also going to be with his sheep. He's going to answer his sheep, verse 9. And so first, the good shepherd is going to refine his sheep. We see this here. There's going to be a group that's going to be cut off. Verse 8, in the whole land declares the Lord, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one-third shall be left alive. So there's going to be a portion of the sheep who are going to fall away. We've talked about this concept in the past, about the remnant, about suffering, and what happens in it. And we know, remember we talked about this in Philippians chapter 1, if you were here in the fall of 18. Near the end of chapter 1, in verses 27 and 30, I gave you the rain jacket illustration. I told you it's not till the storm comes that you know what's real and what's fake. We also talked about this idea in the book of 1 Peter that suffering confirms our faith. If we make it through suffering, it reveals, yes, we are truly Christians.

There's this idea throughout the Old Testament of the remnant, which is a way of referring to the people who remain faithful to God, even in the midst of persecution. This is similar to what we're seeing here in verse 8. There is going to come this suffering, right? The sheep are going to scatter.

This is going to reveal that there are some who appear to belong to God, but actually do not. You can think about it this way. If we suddenly, in a minute, were to experience tremendous persecution in the United States, and Christians were being thrown in jail, and churches were being shut down.

That's not happening, by the way. I'm just using this as an illustration. Immediately, there would be some people who would decide, you know what? Actually, I really liked going to church, but I'm actually not really a Christian.

[12 : 46] And then there would be some who would remain faithful, right? And would stand strong in the midst of persecution. That's the concept of the remnant. The remnant are those who stand strong in the face of persecution. Suffering always reveals what is genuine and what is fake. And so we see that same concept here. There's going to be this suffering, and then verse 8, it's going to result, two-thirds being cut off and perish, and one-third being left alive. What's going to happen, however, to this one-third that's left alive? Well, God is going to refine them. Verse 9, I will put this third into the fire and refine them as one refined silver, and test them as gold is tested.

In other words, God is going to use the process of suffering to purify these people, to remove sin, to sanctify them, to strengthen and to grow their faith. We could think about, by the way, the disciples. We see this. Jesus is applying this passage to them directly, them being scattered after his death. Well, what do we see? Judas. Turns out Judas is not part of the remnant.

Judas falls away. Others are refined. Peter also falls away, not permanently. Remember, Peter falls away because he doesn't like the idea of a suffering Savior. We see that in places like Mark chapter 8, where he rebukes Jesus for saying that he's going to suffer. Then, if you've been with us, you know when we get to 1 Peter and 2 Peter, what is Peter doing? He's talking about the fact that Jesus is a suffering Savior. He's talking about the fact that the Christian life is one of suffering.

God used this scattering specifically in Peter's life to refine him. He used it to build him and grow him. And so there's a narrow application here. We see for the disciples, there's also a broad application for us. God uses suffering in the lives of his people to grow and build them.

That is one of the ways he is a good and faithful shepherd. He does not just die for his sheep. He also works with them. He improves them.

[14 : 54] You know, if you're in the military, and this is especially true in the army, if there's an infraction, you might say especially by someone of a lower rank, sometimes you're given an option. Okay, you have broken this rule. Do you want a smoking, or do you want paperwork? You can choose. Do you want to do lunges for multiple hours in the afternoon in the hot sun, or do you want me to just fill out some paperwork? Well, which is the good option? And who receives those options? If you offer someone the chance to avoid paperwork and for something to never go on your record, what are you saying?

You're saying, I believe you might have a future. It might actually be possible to save you. If you receive enough discipline, you might actually turn into a good soldier. What does it mean if you don't offer them a chance for that? What if you just do paperwork? You're starting the process of getting rid of them. The same is true of God's discipline of his people. He is using it to give them a future and a hope. He is using it because he hasn't given up on them. He did not give up on Peter, right? Peter experienced great discipline. Jesus looked him in the eye when the rooster crowed.

God used it to refine him and use him as one of the greatest instruments in his church. Proverbs chapter 3, remember we looked at this summer, tells us this, My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him who he loves as a father of the son in whom he delights.

And so we can look, that passage, of course, is talking about Jesus giving people suffering because of their sin. This passage is even broader than that. It's Jesus using suffering in a variety of ways, not just suffering for our sin, but suffering in general as a faithful and good shepherd to refine and build and grow his people. And so the point is this, Jesus is our shepherd. He uses our Advent suffering to care for us. And by our Advent suffering, what I mean is this, remember Advent is about the fact that we are in between two comings.

After Jesus' first coming, before his second, he has not come again, we still suffer in this world. Our hope in the midst of that is God is using that for good.

[17 : 19] He is using it for good because we are his sheep and that is what a faithful shepherd does. As we celebrate his first coming, we have tremendous hope, no matter what is happening in our world.

We have a good and loving father. We can look to him no matter what happens. Now, 2020, right? People love to talk about the fact that it's coming to an end.

There's great hope for 2021. I'm not a prophet. I can't tell you exactly why everything in 2020 happened.

Can't interpret it for you. Can't give you the specifics. There are plenty of people who claim to be able to do that. They're pretty close to the category of false teachers. What I can tell you is this.

God is using our suffering to refine us. Because that's always what the faithful shepherd does in suffering. I can also tell you this.

[18 : 21] If 2021 is not better than 2020, but is in fact worse, we're going to be okay. We are going to be okay because our hope is not ultimately in a vaccine.

Our hope is not ultimately in political leaders. Our hope is in our faithful and good shepherd who cares for us no matter what, who is able to use what is bad for something that's good.

In the lives of his people and his children. I got a notice on my phone this morning while I was finishing preparing for this morning about the new strain of the coronavirus.

Now, it's not in the U.S. as far as we know, but apparently it's in London primarily. It is 70% more contagious than the current strain of the coronavirus. And as God's people, we can claim Psalm 112, speaking of the righteous man, he is not afraid of bad news.

His heart is firm, trusting in the Lord. Because he is the shepherd. Remember I told you when we looked at Zechariah chapter 11 about John chapter 10, verse 11, where Jesus says, I am the good shepherd.

[19 : 36] I lay down my life for the sheep. That's not the only thing Jesus says about being a good shepherd. He also says a few verses earlier, I am the door of the sheep. The image of the door is of a shepherd who would lay his body over the entrance to the sheep pen.

Nothing comes in and gets access to the sheep without stepping over the shepherd. The same is true of our Father God.

Nothing touches us without him knowing. By the way, if you want to dig deeper into this, we don't have time this morning, but I mentioned some things from Psalm 31 during our congregational prayer.

Psalm 31 is a great place to go to look at what it means to love God and to take refuge in him. If you want to take a deep dive into that, spend some time in that psalm.

Taking refuge in him, though, is what we see next. God does not just refine his people. He's also with them. He answers them. That's what we see here in verse 9. We've seen already the beginning part of it.

[20 : 42] He's refining them like silver. Then we hear this. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, they are my people, and they will say, the Lord is my God.

Now, if you're an Old Testament Israelite, you would have immediately recognized these words as familiar words from throughout the Old Testament because when God talks about his covenant with his people, it's summarized up in something like this.

I will be your God. You will be my people. And I will dwell with you forever. I will be your God. You will be my people. I will dwell with you forever.

And it's repeated over and over. We see it in places like Leviticus chapter 26, Exodus chapter 29. It's repeated four times each in some form in both Jeremiah and also in Ezekiel.

God says it over and over. And so these people would have recognized this. This is a repetition of the covenant language that God has a special relationship with his people, that he's made promises to them, and that he's going to dwell with them.

[21 : 42] This is the image of the tabernacle in the Old Testament. Remember, the people of Israel would live around the tabernacle, which was in the middle, and it was representing the fact that God lived in the presence of his people.

He was with them personally, geographically. And so they would have known these phrases here are telling them that the covenant is going to be renewed.

God is going to be faithful to the promises he has made to them. This is marriage language here, covenant language. There's an intimacy that God is promising his people in these verses.

His refining of them has an end and a purpose, that what Jesus shows us at his advent, his first advent, will be finally and fully and forever true, that he will actually physically be with his people.

That is the promise that is given of this good shepherd. Of course, if he's a faithful shepherd, he'll be with his people. By the way, while I'm talking about psalms, if you look at Psalm 47, that's a psalm that's rejoicing in how wonderful it is to have God as our king, to have the one who's ruling over us.

[22 : 52] And so for us, the application is this. We've been talking about communion with God. What does it tell us? The first thing here, they will call upon my name and I will answer them. Because of Jesus' first coming and his second coming, because he is the faithful and good shepherd, we are able to call on him and know he will answer.

That's what we're doing this morning as we sing songs to him. That's what we did when we prayed and what we'll do when we'll pray again. God is accessible to his people all the time.

He is always with us. Just like last week, we are looking at basic things. We are looking at the gospel, simple, full, and free. It is tempting for us to take it for granted, but it is something miraculous.

We are able to call on God, speak to him whenever we want, knowing that he will hear us. We also know that his promise is that he'll be with us.

Now, we saw that in part in Jesus' first coming. Jesus was literally with us as a man. Jesus literally was born as a baby in a manger.

[24 : 03] But remember, Jesus tells his disciples in John, the Gospel of John, that it's going to be better when he leaves because the Holy Spirit will be with them, highlighting the fact that Jesus was only in one place at one time during his earthly ministry.

There were limitations to the way he was with his people. We will have God with us even more fully and finally at his second coming.

Now, I told you that these words are repeated over and over in the Old Testament. You will be my people. I will be your God. I will dwell with you forever. They are given for the last time in the most final statement, the most comprehensive statement, not in the Old Testament, but in the very last book of the New Testament, almost the last chapter.

Some of you will study it in the Women's Bible Study next year. It's in Revelation chapter 21. And this explains for us what it is going to be like for God to be present with his people.

It gives us a full picture. This is verses 3 and 4. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

[25 : 23] Repetition of the covenant. Verse 4. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

What does it mean for God to be our shepherd? Not just that he lays down his life, but we know, not just that he's refining us, but also that one day, because he's our shepherd, he himself will be with us as our God.

He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. That's what the shepherd does. Death shall be no more. The shepherd has conquered it. Neither shall there be mourning. The shepherd is with us when we don't need to, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for because of the shepherd, the former things have passed away.

Brothers and sisters, God will be with us even more fully and finally at his second coming. Imagine how much of the holidays you look forward to someone being present physically, right?

And there's benefits they bring with them. If it's grandparents coming into town, most likely they're bringing some presents. Most likely they're bringing things they can only give you if they're there in person.

[26 : 34] Now this is true in reverse as well. If you're older, you know sometimes if your son or daughter comes to visit you, what are they going to do? They might fix that thing around the house that you've been waiting for someone to help you with.

There is a real benefit, a blessing to someone's physical presence there in time and space. The same is true of God. We look forward to him being on the earth, returning in his second coming, knowing that he will be present and our blessings will be even greater than what we can see and experience and imagine now.

He is our great shepherd. He is refining us for a future in which we will be with him. That is the promise of Revelation chapter 21.

That's the fulfillment that we understand that the people who originally received Zachariah's prophecy did not know as well as we do today. And so it is good news, not just in the future, but now that Jesus is our faithful shepherd.

He does not just die for us. He doesn't just lay down his life. He gives us life, and he does it as he makes us look more and more like himself, and he does it as he comes with his presence, that he is our God, and we are his people.

[27 : 59] I begin by telling you about the striking down of shepherds. Of course, the shepherds are not the only targets on the battlefield. If you're aware, you know the Geneva Convention talks about legitimate military targets.

If someone's not a combatant, they're not a legitimate target. So we try to avoid civilians, right? One of the things that people try to avoid on the battlefield, supposedly, is shooting medics.

And so there's a reason, often during various battlefields, medics will wear this cross with a white background, right? It's to mark them out as someone not to be shot. However, more and more, medics are not wearing those things because rather than protecting them, there are combatants who don't respect the Geneva Convention.

This is especially true over in the Middle East. We found that there are insurgents who will target our medics, and so they begin to go undercover because their goal is not to be struck down, right? Their goal is to be able to stay alive so that they can heal the people that are with them.

What we are told in this passage is that Jesus is our shepherd who is struck down, not as an accident, but on purpose.

[29 : 16] That's what we see in verse 7. Remember, God calls on the sword to strike his shepherd rather than being a shepherd who must avoid death to be able to protect us.

God is our shepherd. Jesus is our shepherd who was struck down in order to protect us. Rather than avoiding death, he runs to it. He marks himself out so that he could lay himself down for us.

That, rather than staying alive, is how he brings us healing. That is how he's able to refine us and to be with us. Jesus is the shepherd struck down for his sheep so that he can do what we see here in verses 8 and 9, so that he can make them to be pure like gold and he can dwell with them.

He would be their God and they would be his people. And so that's why we rejoice at Advent, knowing that Jesus is our good and great shepherd. And so I invite you to pray with me.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you that you are a faithful shepherd, not just in laying down your life, not just in removing from us the curse of death, but also in giving us life, giving us a future and a hope with you.

[30 : 36] We ask that you would make these things be true of us, that we would rejoice about them in our hearts. And Father, we ask for those who do not know you, who are not your sheep, that you would call them to yourself and you would move them to repentance and faith, that they would fully and finally call you their shepherd and that they would be your sheep.

Father, we thank you that we don't have to earn these things, but we ask them in Jesus' name because he is the one who gives us communion with you. Amen.