

"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. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I 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. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I 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.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

As barns go, this one is pretty nice!

My dad grew up on a farm. And you know the old saying, don't you? "You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy." That was definitely true for my dad. Although he moved to the city when he was 20, he always liked to go to the farm, which was now owned by his brother. He seemed to enjoy the gardens and fields, the animals and the smells of the country. And if dad went to the farm, we all went. I spent a fair bit of time, especially as a young child, up at the farm. But I'm not a country boy. I was born and raised in the city. I didn't necessarily relish the thoughts of going out to the barn. The barn was dirty. It smelled, especially when all the cows and pigs were in the barn. There were spiders and other bugs in the barn. Oh, the hayloft was nice, especially when the new-mown hay was baled. It was fun to build forts with the bales, or to jump in piles of straw. It wasn't much fun mucking out stalls or having to lug feed for the animals. I didn't like gathering eggs a whole bunch. But we did it. We had to do it. In those days the farm was a major part of our food source. We got our meat from that family farm. We helped harvest potatoes and vegetables, and these were canned and frozen for the winter.

I may not have liked the barn all that much, and wasn't really enamoured with working in the fields. But I know how important the farms of our land are. Farmers feed cities. Whenever you go into the supermarket to buy your fruit and vegetables, your meat, your milk and your bread, remember that it is God, *who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food* (2 Corinthians 9:10 - ESV) and that He provides them for us through the vocation of those who are farmers. If there weren't those country barns, with their dirt, or those fertilized fields that don't smell so great in the spring, we wouldn't enjoy the things that are on our tables day by day. As Murray McLauchlan, in *The Farmer's Song* reminds us: *thanks for the meal; here's a song that is real, from a kid from the city to you.*

In our text today, God speaks to His people as a farmer, and particularly as a shepherd. He speaks of the care He gives, and that He wants to give to His flock. He promises that He will seek His flock, and gather every precious lamb together. He will feed them and lead them into the best of pastures. He will keep them safe and enable them to rest in His care. He will bind up those who are injured. The God who loves us and brings us into His family of grace through the gracious work of His Holy Spirit calls us together as one flock, under one Shepherd: Jesus Christ. He calls us to gather in the safety of His barn, the church.

That takes us back to our opening thought: as barns go, this is really quite nice. I admit that I am stretching the illustration between pasture and barn from the text, but it is easier for us to think of our gathering in a barn rather than a pasture. In this barn there is really no dirt (well, maybe a bit of dust here and there) and fewer spiders. The place doesn't smell—at least not the way we would expect a barn to smell. But, in many ways, it is a barn, nonetheless, for here, in this place, in this church, the God who promises to be the shepherd of His people is at work to care for His flock. In the verses following our text, God says: *And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord God.*" (Ezekiel 34:31 - ESV) It is here, in His barn, if you will, that God provides shelter for His flock, keeping us safe from the enemies of our souls. It is here, in His barn, that God feeds us and tends to our needs. It is here that He tends His flock and assures us of His forgiving love. Our faithful God says: *I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the*

weak.

There is a hymn which sums up the thought of our text today so well: *I am Jesus' little lamb, Ever glad at heart I am; For my Shepherd gently guides me, Knows my need, and well provides me, Loves me every day the same, Even calls me by my name.*

Day by day, at home, away, Jesus is my Staff and Stay. When I hunger, Jesus feeds me, Into pleasant pastures leads me; When I thirst, He bids me go Where the quiet waters flow. (LSB 720, st. 1-2) We are so blessed to be the people of God! What a joy it is to know that the Lord of heaven and earth cares about each and every one of us; that we are something precious to Him. He knows our needs, both our physical needs for each day, and the greater needs of our souls. That is why He calls us together, and leads us here, to His church, to His barn, to His pasture. He brings us together for the same reason animals are sheltered in the barn: to feed us and tend us. He brings us together that His Word may be food for our hungry, troubled souls. He calls us together, that He may declare to us once again the blessings that are ours through the crucified and risen Christ—the blessings of forgiveness, life and salvation. He brings us into His church, so that we may be protected from the enemies of our souls, like the devil. He brings us together, that we may find our rest in Him.

And yet, we are, as another hymn writer says: *Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; Prone to leave the God I love.* (LSB 686, st. 2) We often decide that we don't need the benefits and the blessings that we have in God's barn, in His church. The prophet Hosea tells us: ***Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn; can the Lord now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture?*** (Hosea 4:16 - ESV) Our stubbornness makes us believe that we can do everything on our own. More and more, people think that their faith is just about them and God. The fellowship of believers is being forsaken for a more individual approach. It's that old idea that we don't have to go to church to be a Christian. In this age of iPhones and the internet people can go "on-line" for their spiritual encouragement. Rather than coming to the place where God comes to provide for His people, we often wander alone in the world. But remember what happens to that lone or weak animal in the wild that has wandered away from the herd. Peter reminds us: ***Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*** (1 Peter 5:8 - ESV) We're never as strong as we think we are. On our own, we are easy prey for the devil's attacks.

Back in the late '60's, there was a tv sitcom called "Green Acres". It was the comedic adventures of Oliver Douglas, a New York attorney, who wanted to get away from the city and enjoy farm living. His wife, Lisa, was a socialite, who wanted nothing to do with country living. The theme song for the show pointed out the contrast: For Oliver: *Green acres is the place to be. Farm livin' is the life for me. Land spreadin' out so far and wide; Keep Manhattan, just give me that countryside.* But Lisa's feelings were very different: *New York is where I'd rather stay. I get allergic smelling hay. I just adore a penthouse view. Darling I love you, but give me Park Avenue.*

We see those same contrasts, even among Christians. All of our lessons today speak of the lost who are found. In God's version of "Green Acres", it is God who seeks us out, and calls us to life only He can give. The Greek word that we translate as church actually contains this idea. The church, literally, is the gathering of those who are called out of the world. In our text, God said: ***And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land.*** God calls us out of the rat race, and out of the world of struggle and fear and death. He calls us to His peaceful countryside and to the protection of life in His barn. Jesus says: ***Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*** (Matthew 11:28-29 - ESV) We come with our guilt and shame, and find the freeing power of the cross, and the forgiveness Christ has accomplished for us. We come in the problems and cares and emptiness of our days, and find the strength and hope that we have in God's love. We come, overwhelmed by death and find life in the assurance that Jesus died, but He lives, and we will live through Him. Paul's wonderful words set the stage: ***The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.*** (1 Timothy 1:15 - ESV) Christ seeks us. He saves us. And through the Holy Spirit, He calls us out of the world and leads us to His barn, that He may continue to care for us in all things.

And yet there are those who want to stay in the world. They don't want to go to the barn; they want the big city. Paul tells Timothy about a co-worker, and says with sadness: ***For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.*** (2 Timothy 4:10 - ESV) How many others are like that? There are the distractions of the stores and the sports and the activities that often seem more important than gathering in God's barn. We are lured by the devil and our own sinful hearts into the unsafe places and pastimes that we think will bring fulfillment, but which are so empty in so many ways. We don't even realize that we are starving for lack of the Word and Sacraments. We just like the lights and sounds and supposed excitement of the world, more than we want the peace, the joy and the blessings of God's church.

Thankfully, we are assured that God seeks us, rescues us, delivers us. We know the dear promise of our Saviour: ***I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*** (John 10:11 - ESV) Our shepherd was willing to do all that is necessary to bring us back into His pasture; into His barn. He gave Himself in place of His people as He dies on the cross. He rises again to lead us into the blessed life He has prepared for us in His kingdom. He continues to call us together, to be fed, nourished and guided under His loving care. God's "Green Acres" is the place to be. The blessings He brings us through His church are unequalled in the world. His life-giving Word; the cleansing waters of Baptism; the forgiving and strengthening gifts of Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion—these are the gifts He sets before His flock. That's why this place exists: not for our glory, but for His glory, as He cares for His flock. What loving care God gives us! And He gives it here, in His church, to us, His beloved sheep. Amen.