

Lent provides us with time for repentance. What is repentance? It is sorrow over sin and faith in Christ.

Through God's word we stare the reality of our sin in the face, mourning its affects, recognizing our shame, realizing our guilt and the punishment we rightly deserve. Yet there is a second part of repentance, faith in Christ. Faith which trusts that God forgives our sin on account of Christ. During these 40 days of Lent we look to our Saviour, we trust that because we are connected to him, our sin is paid for, our shame is removed, our guilt is covered and our punishment is taken.

Tonight, God gives us opportunity for repentance: sorrow over our sin and faith in Christ as we see that **God strikes the undeserving shepherd instead of sinful deserving sheep.**

**“Awake, sword, against my shepherd,  
against the man who is close to me!”  
declares the LORD Almighty.  
“Strike the shepherd,  
and the sheep will be scattered,  
and I will turn my hand against the little ones.  
In the whole land,” declares the LORD,  
“two-thirds will be struck down and perish;  
yet one-third will be left in it.  
This third I will put into the fire;  
I will refine them like silver  
and test them like gold.  
They will call on my name  
and I will answer them;  
I will say, ‘They are my people,’  
and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God.’”**

The LORD is speaking in this section and poetically says **sword, awake**. The sword is the LORD's justice and punishment against evil. It had been asleep. Now was the time to act. The LORD is about to unleash the full force of his justice and judgment. **Against my shepherd. The man who is close to me.**

This is none other than Jesus. The Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The one who is close to the Father. And the word used for “close” in this verse, is used elsewhere in the bible to speak of someone who dwells side by side and is equal. **This “man who is close” is the Son of God who was with God from the beginning and who was God from all eternity.**

If we had any doubt about the identity of the shepherd, Jesus clears it up as he quotes this prophecy of Zechariah with his disciples as he is about to suffer and die.

**Jesus tells his disciples at the Passover meal “This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’” (Matthew 26:31)**

Jesus is the shepherd his followers are the sheep. Soon the little flock would be scattered as he is handed over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. He would be struck and the sheep would be nowhere to be found.

The question to ask as we observe God's word isn't "whose speaking in this section?" or "who is the shepherd?", "who are the sheep?" God gives us those answers. The question is **why does God send a sword against his own Son? Why does he strike the shepherd?**

Is it because his shepherd was delinquent in his duties? Did he fail to pursue the lost and straying? Did he fail to tend his flock and lead them to streams of living water and life? No, he is Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 for the one. Jesus perfectly sought after the people who were like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus perfectly led his flock to Living Water, to himself.

The shepherd is not struck because of failure on his part, but because of failure on our part. The danger was God's holy anger at us, sheep who would not listen. Sheep like us, who wander onto trails of temptation to find treasures that turn into traps and pleasures that turn into pain.

So how have you wandered? The temptation that you give into far too easily. The things you see as valuable that take priority in your heart over God. The pleasure you pursue that God warns you to avoid that only leaves you in pain. You've wandered. I have too. We have wandered from our God. God's Word to us should be "**Awake O Sword, against the sheep, The ones who have distanced themselves from me by their sin and rebellion. Strike the sheep**" God would every right, but God does not strike the deserving sheep, but the underserving yet willing shepherd.

God teaches us this truth so clearly in the prophecy of Isaiah:

**We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6)**

The Father strikes his Son. The cross is where our Saviour is pierced for our transgression and crushed for our iniquities. The Shepherd is struck instead of the sheep, so that the sheep, those who had wandered could be brought back to the fold of God.

As we look at verse 8-9 we ask what the meaning is of the "2/3 who would perish" and "1/3 who would be left". In describing what would happen in the future fulfillment of these words, Zechariah drew on the past. When the people of Israel when they went into captivity a large amount, 2/3, perished, but a remnant, 1/3, was preserved by God.

As we think of Jesus ministry we see the fulfillment of these words during Holy Week. The large crowds that gathered around Jesus on Palm Sunday diminished. Easter morning there was a small group. A small remnant that God preserved. This remnant, the followers of Jesus, would

experience the fire mentioned in our verses. As gold and silver are refined and tested through fire God would allow his followers to experience trials to refine and purify their faith. God's purpose for testing is always constructive not destructive. It is always to improve not destroy.

Before the Jesus and his disciples left the upper room for Gethsemane, Jesus assured Peter:

**“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”** (Luke 22:31-32)

Peter's faith faltered that night as he denied his Master three times. But his faith did not fail, because his Savior was praying for him. And when Peter turned back, Jesus forgave him and commissioned him to feed the flock. Peter's faith that he was the Savior's chosen servant was now stronger. His testimony that the Lord was his God was also stronger. And this man, who had once appeared so weak, went on to strengthen his brothers (and sisters too) who were in their own refining fire.

Like the disciples in the garden, we have had our own embarrassing moments that revealed our still-imperfect faith. They happen when standing up for Jesus in the face of enemies seems too dangerous, when standing up for the truth in the face of lies seems too difficult, when standing up for good in the face of evil seems even deadly. Our devotion from a distance has often wilted into denial in the heat of battle, as Peter's did.

If you have acted like those disciples who scattered, recall that the Good Shepherd allowed those timid sheep to return. He has been praying for *you* in your trials, and he will not let your faith fail. He knows that after the test, your faith will emerge from the fire purer and stronger. He has already purified you of sin when he was struck by the sword for you.

Look at how that refining and purifying changed the apostles. Look at Peter. The same disciple who disowned Jesus three times is recorded in the book of Acts being flogged and rejoicing with John having being counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41). And tradition reports that all but John died as martyrs for their persistence in clinging to Jesus. God utilizes testing and trials from his constructive purpose. The faith of the apostles grew and their witness to Jesus spread to the world.

God utilizes testing and trials to forge our faith as well. Trials are not supposed to be easy or pain-free. But God will use them for his good and gracious purpose. They leave us clinging to our God confessing that he is our strength.

Listen again to Zechariah as he describes the result of the refining process:

**“They will call on my name  
and I will answer them;  
I will say, ‘They are my people,’  
and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God.’”**

When your faith falters, you can still proclaim, “The Lord is my God.” When Satan whispers that you are eternally lost for what you have done, you can still boast, “The Lord is my God.” When death causes your confidence to crumble, you can still declare, “The Lord is my God.”

You say this confidently because your Saviour has been struck for you. You are part of his flock.

And when your Father hears your confession of faith, he will proudly say, **“These are my people.”**

Amen.