

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Second Sunday in Lent
March 4, 2026
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Scattered sheep.

Today, we have a portion of Zechariah's prophecy which may seem a little odd to us. The Lord speaks through Zechariah and addresses a sword. Of course, he isn't actually speaking to a sword, but he is talking about the suffering and death that would come to Jesus. Remember Zechariah prophesied these words 520 years before Jesus came to this earth. This is from Zechariah 13:7-9:

Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man who is my associate, declares the LORD of Armies. Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones. ⁸ This will take place in the whole land, declares the LORD: Two thirds of those who remain in it will be cut off and perish, but one third will be left in it. ⁹ I will put that third into the fire, and I will refine them as silver is refined, and I will test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, "This is my people." And they will say, "The LORD is my God." (Zechariah 13:7-9)

Do you know when those words were fulfilled? As Jesus and his disciples concluded their final Passover meal, Matthew writes this in his Gospel: **"When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus told them, "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 26:30,31).

And in the next dreadful hours, those words would be fulfilled. During Jesus' arrest, the disciples all deserted Jesus and fled. And Matthew writes, **"This has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled"** (Matthew 26:56).

But notice who is sending the sword against Jesus. Look at the prophecy carefully. **"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man who is my associate, declares the LORD of Armies. Strike the shepherd."**

Now just think about this. Parents, you know how this is. As parents, we are supposed to love and protect our kids, right? Yet *God* sent a sword against his own Son! Why? Why would the Lord strike down this perfect Good Shepherd, who had done everything a faithful shepherd was supposed to do? Why would a loving Father send a sword against his sinless Son?

You know why: **"God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son."** A faithful shepherd places himself between the flock and danger. In this case, the danger was God's holy anger at 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. Yet in his unfathomable love and wisdom, the sword of the Lord struck the Shepherd, not the sheep. We recall the words of the prophet Isaiah: **"We all have gone astray like sheep. Each of us has turned to his own way, but the LORD has charged all our guilt to him"** (Isaiah 53:6).

We guilty sheep are spared from God's sword of justice. We defenseless sheep are saved from the beast of hell. We straying sheep are retrieved by a Shepherd who went all the way to the cross to rescue us **"that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."**

That's why the Lord struck down the Shepherd. He willingly made his Son suffer death and hell so that you would never have to. God struck the shepherd.

Well, when a shepherd is struck down, what happens to the sheep? If you're thinking, "They scatter in fear," you're thinking like Zechariah, who wrote, **"Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered."**

On their way to the Mount of Olives, Jesus quoted Zechariah's prophecy to his disciples. Sure enough, as the Good Shepherd was being bound for trial, the sheep bounded into the darkness. They ran away in fear.

But there was more to Zechariah's prophecy, and the news wasn't cheerful. **"Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones. ⁸ This will take place in the whole land, declares the LORD: Two thirds of those who remain in it will be cut off and perish, but one third will be left in it."**

God is a loving Father, but he is also a righteous judge who must administer the justice that lawbreakers deserve. Zechariah isn't giving an exact math problem for us. He isn't saying that 66% of all people are going to hell and 34% will go to heaven. But he is teaching something that was important to remember in the Old Testament Scriptures.

If you recall God's Old Testament people, the majority of them had turned away from the Lord. Instead of following the Lord, they rejected him. And God had said that if people push him away, if they reject him, they will be cast away from him. And sadly, it is true that the majority of people in the world will do this.

But even though the majority of God's people had rejected him and turned away from him, God had promised that there would always be a remnant. There would always be believers like you and me. Oh, we see what we deserve because of our sins. We see that we deserve to be scattered from the Lord forever. But we also see that Jesus is the solution to our rebellion. And therefore, we are part of the one-third that will be spared. We are part of the remnant of believers.

Do you see that? But here's where it gets interesting. What's in store for you and me? What's in store for the one-third? Zechariah continues: **"I will put that third into the fire, and I will refine them as silver is refined, and I will test them as gold is tested."** In other words, life is not going to be easy.

Now, many in Jesus' day, as in Zechariah's day, preferred an easy life. They wanted a Messiah who would give them power and prosperity, comfort and ease, and their best life right now. When Jesus explained that it would not be that way, most of his followers deserted him to await a more satisfying Savior.

A few remained. When the Master asked the Twelve if they too wanted to leave, Peter answered, **"Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life"** (John 6:68).

Unfortunately, those disciples also hoped for a life of power and prosperity, comfort and ease, and their best life right now. Think about the sons of thunder, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who had their mother ask Jesus to let her boys sit on his right and on his left in his kingdom. They wanted the glory. Many of Jesus' disciples wanted that. They wanted the glory and ease of a powerful kingdom. But what did Jesus have planned for his disciples?

Well, instead, they would face refinement by fire. Jesus had bluntly warned them at the Last Supper: **"Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too"** (John 15:20). He also said, **"They will put you out of the synagogues. In fact, a time is coming when anyone who murders you will think he is offering a service to God"** (John 16:2).

Yikes! I don't know about you, but that isn't something I pray for. I don't pray for hardships or difficulties. I don't pray that for myself or for my children. No, we don't want such things to come to us or our children. Lord, spare us from such pain and hardships, huh? We inwardly hope that we will not be called on to endure such tests. A life of health, financial security, bliss in every relationship, and all-around happiness is far more appealing. Many seek only a Savior who will give them that kind of life.

But what if the Lord allows us to taste pain and sorrow, disappointment and defeat? Should we not *welcome* trials rather than run from them? Fire burns, but it also purifies. Should we not *desire* a faith that is refined like silver and gold? Should we not pray, "Lord, test me in the fire. Remove the impurities in my faith so that my faith emerges stronger than ever"? "Lord, test my children. Allow them to go through the trials of life so that their faith will be like pure gold"? Do we pray like that?

Trials are not supposed to be easy or pain-free. But the Lord promises to use them to make you stronger. Think about the apostle Peter. Before the Master and his disciples left the upper room for Gethsemane, Jesus assured Peter: **"Simon, Simon, pay attention: Satan has asked to have you all, so that he may sift you as wheat. ³² But I prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have returned to me, 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 who were in their own refining fire. Later he wrote to first-century believers: **"Because of this you rejoice very much, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various kinds of trials ⁷ so that the proven character of your faith—which is more valuable than gold, which passes away even though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed"** (1 Peter 1:6-7).

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.

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, “This is my people.” And they will say, “The LORD is my 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.”** It is such a comfort and joy to know that our Good Shepherd is not dead, but he is alive. He rose from the dead. And this relationship can only exist because Jesus came back from the dead as the great Victor. So, we boldly proclaim, **“The LORD is my God.”**

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

Lord, purify our faith. Amen.