

“Good Pasture”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 24, 2019

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 23

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 25-31

According to our church calendar, today is the final Sunday of the Christian year. A new year begins next Sunday, December 1, on the first Sunday of Advent. We designate this final Sunday as Christ the King Sunday – a time to reflect back upon the mighty acts of God in Jesus: the king of kings, the lord of lords. We proclaim that one day, every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth shall bow down to him.

Throughout the ages, the Church has gotten a lot of mileage from this regal imagery: the soaring cathedrals, the royal pageantry, the lavish robes and crown. “All hail the power of Jesus’ name...and crown him lord of All!” This powerful imagery captures our imagination. I grew up with this royal language and I sometimes still get lost in it. But I also know that all images have their shortcomings and can grow stale with overuse; that painting the picture of Jesus solely as a king is lacking and incomplete.

Today’s readings – both Ezekiel, chapter 34 and the 23rd Psalm – describe the reign of God without kingly imagery. It prompts us to move beyond the throne and consider something different; challenging us, and our churches, to think about how regal language has sometimes been used in unhealthy ways. God is not merely a king, hidden safely inside a palace, over and above God’s loyal subjects. These scriptures instead broaden our understanding of who God is.

Ezekiel was a Hebrew prophet who spoke from Babylon during the Judean exile. The pain of witnessing dislocation and cultural decimation created a heavy burden on the exiles; as anyone who has worked with or among refugees would attest. Ezekiel himself comes close to breaking under the strain of what is required of him. Today, we would call some of the prophet’s behavior described in this book the product of post-traumatic stress.¹

In the opening verses of this chapter, Ezekiel launches into a searing indictment of Israel’s leaders: they have ruled harshly and corruptly, enriching

¹ Carolyn Sharp from *WorkingPreacher.com*

themselves at the expense of the people and failing to safeguard those who depend on them. So, as we hear in today's reading, God is planning to step in and serve as the new shepherd of this traumatized flock.

Ezekiel's use of the good shepherd metaphor was, in the ancient world, purely and intentionally political. To be a king was to be a shepherd: responsible for the safety and care of the flock. But here, because the people have been exploited – first by their own leaders in Israel, and now by the rulers of Babylon – the nation been materially, mentally, and spiritually destroyed.

As its shepherd, God comes to the flock to assess the damage after it has been scattered; discerning its needs before taking action. What follows is a rescue operation, as God seeks out the scattered sheep from all the far places they have been scattered. Of first importance, then, is the re-creation of a viable community: seeking the lost, tending to the injured, and reversing the injustices that have been inflicted on the flock. The shepherd will strengthen the weak, but will feed the fat and the strong – those who caused the injuries – with justice.²

And so, in the midst of their trauma and trouble, God will seek out the exiles and bring them back. God will not wait for them to return to Israel, but will search for them; feeding and nurturing and healing them. God will provide justice for them by confronting those leaders who have failed them. It's hard not to notice here the similarities not only between Ezekiel's vision and that of the 23rd Psalm, but also with Jesus as the good shepherd in John's Gospel, as well as the separation of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25. In each of these places, God takes notice of and identifies most with those who are vulnerable and suffering.

Many who read the Old Testament sometimes wonder: *where is the good news; where is the God who does not destroy but saves; where do we find hope?* Sometimes, it takes trading in a tired or overused image for a different one so that we might discover the God of good news revealed in Christ: the God who is with us and for us; the God who guides and saves and sustains us; the God who loves unconditionally and never lets us go.

While the shepherds that the sheep of this exiled, traumatized flock knew had been self-indulgent and evil; the good news is that because of God's love, it need not be so. As the people of Israel need not always suffer under the rule of self-serving kings, we also have hope that we might encounter the One who seeks the lost, brings back the scattered, feeds the hungry, binds up the injured, and strengthens the weak. This is, both the Psalmist and Ezekiel tell us in today's

² Margaret Odell from *WorkingPreacher.com*

readings, who God is: the one who shepherds us with justice and care; this is the One who comes to save.³

Although Ezekiel considers the exile to be an unavoidable step in God's program of restoration and renewal, this text does not support the all-too-prevalent idea that all suffering is somehow part of "God's plan." From Ezekiel's perspective, the exile happened because of the people's sin, but not all suffering derives from punishment for sin. Sometimes, suffering comes from abuse or unfairness or what we ironically call "acts of God." And from this world that is sometimes unfair, cruel or painful, God does bring healing. This is how God reigns; this is who God is.

A couple of weeks ago, we heard from the prophet Isaiah a vision about a shoot coming from the stump of Jesse; new life emerging from what had seemingly been long dead. In just a few chapters beyond today's reading, the prophet Ezekiel will offer a similarly striking vision of hope for new life. The prophet is taken to a valley that is filled with dry bones, presumably an ancient battlefield where the remains of the fallen rest long after they were slain in war. There, the prophet is asked if those old, dry bones could live again; and as a sign of God's power to bring new life, the bones begin rattling and coming together, growing new flesh and filled again with God's breath, the breath of life.

For a people who were living in exile, forcibly removed from their homes and families, these images of hope for new life – a new shoot growing from an old stump and scattered bones coming back together – would have been as important to them as food and water. For, without hope that their God had not been left behind when they were taken to a foreign land; without hope that the good shepherd would indeed find them, bring them back, heal them, feed and strengthen them; without hope in a God of renewal and salvation, they could not have lived.

Maybe you have been there as well; not in literal exile, but feeling far away from home, separated from the flock, suffering from abuse or pain or regret. Maybe it was a time when you or someone you loved came face-to-face with a major illness; maybe it resulted from losing the job you couldn't afford to lose. Or maybe, like me, it came in the midst of a broken relationship that tore your family apart and left you wondering if things could ever be the same again.

Even in the midst of our deepest suffering, God is the one who seeks out the scattered and longs to bring them home. God, the good shepherd leads us to green pastures and beside the still waters, but also is with us when we travel through the

³ Walter Brueggemann, "Failed Kings and the Good Shepherd"

darkest valleys. God is the one who will banish the wild animals and provides good vegetation. This is the good news of a God who seeks and saves.

The hard part, of course, is to maintain a posture of hope in the midst of those times when it feels like we are in exile – to believe that a new shoot can grow out of the dead stump and that the old, dry bones can come back to life. What we learn, when Christ the King comes, is that in order to live into God’s reign, we must join in the work of the good shepherd. What Jesus shows us is that God is willing and even eager to engage in the dirty, challenging, sometimes dangerous work of shepherding. And so, if that is what a real king, a shepherd king, does; then God wants us to do it, too. To search for and gather in the lost; to feed the hungry and heal the wounded; to willingly go into the kind of places and situations most people would avoid.

And so, as much as God might show us – through prophetic visions of hope and through the reign of Christ the good shepherd – how to find good pasture, we have been called to help turn this vision into reality. Many of you will do this by taking an angel off the tree or putting food in the basket, or by choosing to participate in alternative giving this Christmas season. In the same way, we help provide good pasture when we visit those who are lonely, or work for change in unjust practices, or protest against harmful policies.

For God not only gathers in the sheep who have suffered, God also brings to judgment those who have taken advantage of the sheep. Therefore, God is also calling us to challenge and speak out against any person, any power or any institution that might prey on the members of God’s precious flock. When Jesus describes his judgment in Matthew 25, his standard for separating the sheep from the goats is clear: *how well did you go forth and tend to those who are suffering?*

The conclusion of the Christian year, like the end of our calendar year, offers us a chance to reflect on what has been and what is coming. As God’s people, we give thanks for Christ the king and the good shepherd, the one who willingly lays down his life for the sake of the sheep in the flock. We, as followers of Christ the King, are reminded that Jesus’ power leads us to devote our passion and energy to the humble, heartfelt love of God and neighbor.⁴ Amen.

⁴ Rev. Sue Hauptert-Johnson, “God Has Left the Building” from *Day1.org*