

## Shepherding the Sheep

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Have you ever made a mistake that the whole world could see? That happened at the beginning of November. Two astronauts at the International Space Station were working on a solar array, and lost one of their tool bags. Because of the reflective coating on the bag, it can be seen from Earth using just binoculars. One simple mistake and the world can see it.

Leaders make mistakes, as well, that are often very visible. Fans think they can call better plays than Brian Ferenz, or Nate Scheelhaase, or manage a baseball game better than David Ross or Oliver Marmol. Presidential gaffes may make for good fodder for comedians, but don't make for good leadership or problem-solving. Congressmen who put their own ambitions over their constituents' needs create partisan gridlock that causes problems in our nation and beyond. Failures of leadership cause disillusionment and distrust, and hurts not just the leaders, but the people they're leading.

As we hear Ezekiel this morning, we hear an oracle that describes the failure of Judah's leaders, especially their pre-exilic kings, as well as God's plan to correct the disastrous situation. Ezekiel, sitting in a slave labor camp at the edge of Babylon, can see the results of the many mistakes the leaders, the shepherds of Israel, had made. As Lawrence Boadt writes in his commentary on Ezekiel, "Ezekiel lived through the greatest crisis in ancient Israel's history: the final destruction of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem; the loss of independence in the promised land, exile of all the leading citizens to Babylonia; and the tearing down of the temple and the removal of the House of David from kingship."

How are the people to go forward without the land given to them by God? How are they to worship God without a temple? Who will be their leader? The devastating experience of exile brings a new understanding of God and God's relationship with the people. The exile has exposed the leadership responsible for helping the weak and defenseless. Israel has been thrown to wild animals and needs a rescuer.

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel...the weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them" (Ezekiel 34:2, 4). Ezekiel is referring to Judah's last four kings—Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. They fleeced the flock, caring only for themselves. Ezekiel the pastor to those in exile says to the political leaders of his time, "You shepherds have fed yourselves and have not fed my sheep." These leaders ought to be caring for the sheep, not exploiting them and fattening their own lives.

But Ezekiel knows that it's not just the kings to blame. While the shepherds inflicted suffering on the sheep, the sheep themselves were not without blame. They couldn't just cry out that they were victims, that they were being oppressed, and were therefore in the right. Yes, the battered flock was oppressed by the wild animals of Babylon, and by their leaders who had been bad shepherds. Yet they still had bullies in their midst. The sin was not just outside of them. The sin was inside, as well.

Humanly speaking, Israel's problems were unsolvable. A human shepherd cannot do all

that needs to be done. A human shepherd cannot bind up the broken and seek and save the lost. Even were a human shepherd inclined to do those things, the tasks are too big. Sheep are desperate for this new shepherd.

What will the Lord do? He will take matters into his own hands. "Behold, I, I myself will seek ... I will search for my sheep ... I will search for my sheep... I will rescue. I will bring them ... I will gather them ... I will bring them ... I will shepherd them ... I will shepherd them. I myself will shepherd ... I myself will cause them to lie down." (Ezekiel 34:11-15) In five verses God refers to himself seventeen times. Talk about taking matters into your own hands!

The new shepherd that would come was Jesus. He came to be the good shepherd for the sheep. He came to fulfill everything that the shepherds of Israel, their kings and religious leaders, had failed to do. And then he died on the cross, the sacrifice to make up for all of the mistakes made by shepherd and sheep alike. All that their mistakes, all that their sin deserved, was placed on him on the cross. All that our mistakes, all that our sin deserved, was placed there, too.

How good is this Shepherd? When we wander astray, he leaves the ninety-nine and comes searching for us. When we are confused by the voices of demons and devils, he calls us by name. When we get lost in the lunacy of life, he loves us and forgives us. The Messiah gathers us into his arms until we are better, holds us until we can live with the hurt, and carries us close to his loving heart forever.

As the Good Shepherd, he laid down his life out of love for us, and calls us to follow him in laying down our lives for each other out of love. But Jesus didn't only die for us; he lives

for us, as well. Because Jesus lives, we too live new lives, lives of sacrifice and service.

God sends the messiah to be their shepherd and prince. God secures for them a covenant of peace. God provides security in the midst of everything. God speaks to them directly.

Our reading from Ezekiel this morning ends with the reassuring words "I am the LORD; I have spoken." That is, everything said in this chapter is a promise, and God's promise is true.

One newer tradition about this Sunday, the last one of the church year, is that it is celebrated as Christ the King Sunday. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in response to the growing nationalism and fascism that was beginning to take hold following World War I. The aim of the feast day was to refocus the church on Christ as its leader instead of the allure of earthly powers. Ezekiel's message too reminds us not to put our trust in earthly princes or powers, but to instead follow Christ our Good Shepherd.

As the end of the semester approaches, as life continues to be full of change, as pain still comes into our lives, remember that you are all sheep of the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for you, to forgive you for all the things that will go wrong, to sustain you and lead you in the ways that you should go. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus is with you. Through him, you live. In him, you die. And, by him, you will be raised to eternal life.

This is the Good News of the Good Shepherd: where we failed, Jesus succeeded. Where we made mistakes, Jesus erases them and covers them up. Where we fail to lead well, or follow well, He leads us beside still waters. Where we cast blame and make excuses, he takes on the

responsibility. When you fear that you have wandered far from the fold, Jesus finds you and brings you back. And when you know that you have nothing, absolutely nothing, to offer God, he offers you himself. This has nothing to do with what kind of sheep we've been. It has everything to do with the love and mercy of the Good Shepherd. He's the Good Shepherd, and he lays down his life for the sheep. The Good Shepherd is with you and before you and in you—and for you. That's a promise we can trust.

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