

*“SHEEP OF THE SHEPHERD”*

*EZEKIEL 34:1-4, 10-12, 14-22 (WITH MATTHEW 25)*

*24 NOVEMBER 2024 (REIGN OF CHRIST)*

*FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH*

*Today’s text is a smattering from Ezekiel, with some slight amendments to the verses listed in your bulletin. Hear now Ezekiel 34, verses 1-4, 10-12, and 14-22.*

The word of the Lord came to me: <sup>2</sup>Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup>You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup>You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

<sup>10</sup>Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.

<sup>11</sup> For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup>As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness [...] <sup>14</sup>I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup>I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. <sup>16</sup>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, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

<sup>17</sup> As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: <sup>18</sup>Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? <sup>19</sup>And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?

<sup>20</sup> Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. <sup>21</sup>Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, <sup>22</sup>I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

*The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.***

I am concerned that Little Bo-Peep has been misled. Y'all remember that nursery rhyme? "Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep" (and what?) "And can't tell where to find them; Leave them alone," the narrator tells her, "and they'll come home, Bringing their tails behind them." Let this be your first lesson this morning: you can't always trust a narrator.

It's not uncommon in Western culture to hear about animal husbandry, which is odd if you consider that most of us live in cities with very few experiences of life on the farm. But still — for at least two millennia — we've been talking about farm animals...and not *just* farm animals. Not the cattle and chicken of my grandfather's farm — or your family farm in Anderson (I know there are some of y'all out there!). We in the West have been talking about sheep.

Hammurabi (he of the infamous ancient Babylonian legal code, dating to 1700 years before the common era) used shepherding metaphors to talk about his rule — not unusual, given the agrarian setting. A thousand years later the prophet Ezekiel, writing as a Jewish exile in Babylon, records the scroll we read today, which explicitly names Israel's former kings as bad shepherds, God as the good shepherd, and the people as sheep. The Psalmist entrusts God as their shepherd. Shepherds show up in Isaiah and Jeremiah, and then in Luke when Jesus is born.

Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd in John and reminds the gathered crowd in Matthew that he will separate sheep from goats. In Revelation, Jesus appears as the lamb who was slain.

Years later, as urbanization was taking hold of England, Shakespeare picks up on ancient imagery of shepherding, comparing the gentle hands of a noble to the rough hands of a shepherd, "tarr'd over with the surgery of our sheep."

Two-hundred years after that Little Bo-Peep loses track of her little bo-sheep, and she's fed that dangerous bit of misinformation —

"Leave them alone, and they'll come home."

The thing about sheep is that they won't come home. That's precisely why they need a shepherd. Sheep get lost. They wander. They are woefully unaware of the threat of wild beasts or rogue hunters. Without a shepherd they wouldn't make their way to pasture, much less back home. That's the whole point of Jesus' parable about the lost sheep!

Precisely that attribute of sheep — their guilelessness — became the controlling way we think about sheep in the mid 20th century.

By 1943, when George Orwell wrote *Animal Farm*, the cultural focus seems to have shifted from docile, fluffy sheep and the hard work of raising them toward a decidedly more negative critique of sheep as easily misled, foolish in their trust, and much to be pitied. The sheep in *Animal Farm* represent the dangers of the type of naive group-think that bows its will to sinister forces and follows nefarious power-hungry leaders even against their own best interest.

Perhaps it's unsurprising that "sheeple" — a rather clumsy portmanteau of "sheep" and "people," signifying a group unable to exercise independent thinking, rose to common usage around the time Orwell was writing...though I wasn't aware of the term until 2021 when it was constantly bandied with unintended irony to belittle folks like me who were getting vaccines and quarantining in hopes that doing so would protect the community.

All this to say, we talk about sheep a surprising lot...black sheep, counting sheep, sheep among wolves...we ask the Lord to be our shepherd and to supply our need...

...but in our everyday lives apart from this place we go about parroting the virtue of absolute strength, extolling our capacity to spend and acquire without limit, taking for granted our independence, and acting like being a sheep is the entire problem with the world in which we live.

Do you see the disconnect? We ask for a shepherd...but we don't want to be a sheep. Today both Ezekiel and Jesus confront us with the consequences of our inquiry:

if God *is* our shepherd, then we *are* fluffy, foolish, fickle sheep.

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday. If you were in "It's Elementary" during the 2023-2024 program year you will remember that the Reign of Christ (also known as "Christ the King") is the final Sunday of the Christian year. It's our New Years Eve. No more fussing with ordinary time, we're heading into Advent and beginning the story all over.

Generally Reign of Christ Sunday focuses on God's kingship. The *Ezekiel* text we read today is a traditional text for Reign of Christ — but only partially. In the lectionary (which is a list of suggested readings for any given Sunday), we Presbyterians lob off this text just after God announces the divine intention to reclaim the flock and be the Good Shepherd that the people sorely need.

We talk about our need for good leadership. We proclaim that God is our shepherd, and we close the books and carry on, fresh-faced and dewey for the beginning of the Christian New Year.

I imagine if you were following along with the first few verses of today's text you were likely nodding in agreement — *ain't this a word we need today!* — no matter where you fall on the political spectrum you have surely, like me, have pointed out the failures (or *the presumed potential* failures) of America's shepherds: "Woe, shepherds of Israel," offers Robert Alter in his translation of *Ezekiel*, "You eat the suet and wear the wool, slaughter the fat one. The flock you do not shepherd." In other words: you're in it for yourselves, for your gain, for your benefit, for all the glory of leadership without the tarr'd hands of *actually* providing for the needs of every

last sheep in the flock. You look out for yourself while your sheep come under attack, wander aimlessly into danger, and generally find no support in their time of need.

“<sup>4</sup>You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.”

(Sounds an awful lot like Jesus’ warning in Matthew 25, wouldn’t you say?)

Ezekiel 34 is a scathing critique of Israel’s leadership that echoes throughout the ages and rings in our ears. Bad shepherding had disastrous consequences for God’s chosen people — not in theory, not as a matter of policy — but for the actual flesh and blood people over whom the leaders were given responsibility. Not only have the sheep not been fed, bad shepherds allowed their flock to be scattered, sold out to foreign powers ... to Assyria and Babylon — a reference to the Captivity, during which time Ezekiel the Prophet had been carried away.

We all recognize bad shepherds in our halls of power, and we’ve spent plenty of time placing every bit of blame squarely at their staffs. Ezekiel reminds us that God’s anger, our anger is well deserved. When the shepherds stay from God’s mandates the sheep — or, let’s drop the metaphor for a moment — the people suffer.

It’s easy for us to stand with God against such injustice, to amplify God’s judgment to those bad shepherds: “I am against the shepherds.”

The lectionary text keeps all the judgment against the leaders and picks up on God’s subsequent promise to shepherd the people, “I Myself will herd My flock...The lost one I will seek out...the one with the broken limb I will bind up, and the weak one I will strengthen, but the fat and the strong I will destroy.”

We usually end the text there, a forebearer of the Magnificat we will begin to hear next week.

The problem for us is that Ezekiel had more to say. “I will herd [the flock] in justice. And you are My flock...I am about to judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and he-goats.”

God judged the shepherds. But they weren’t the only ones who missed the mark.

Here’s what I want y’all to hear in this text, an ancient wisdom that is as urgent as ever. Justice not only about calling out the bad shepherds and demanding equitable care for the flock.

It’s also about the identity and character of the sheep. *It’s about what we do.*

Remember, if the Lord is our shepherd we are the sheep. Peculiar sheep of a peculiar shepherd. And, to quote my farmer grandmother, “we best act like it.”

There are a lot of folks in this congregation who are movers and shakers in our community and a lot who can get things done. I am grateful for that. And there are certainly some here who feel powerless in the face of a daunting future. I am sympathetic to that. But to each, and to all in between, God says: *you are sheep*. Specifically: *you are my sheep, the sheep of the Good Shepherd*.

If we are going to talk about the Reign of Christ, we have to talk about what characterizes that reign. And for us, it is being formed as sheep, as creatures of the great creator, as a flock in the likeness of the Good Shepherd. Before we are anything else, like it or not, we are followers, disciples, sheep, and that should make a discernible difference in how we live. We are not utterly free, not comically strong. We are here with and among a flock, and we too, not only the shepherds, are charged with its care.

We are sheeple. God's sheeple. Discipleship is an act of subsuming our wills to the will of the Good Shepherd, the one who longs for a whole flock, where all are fed, all are provided for, and all are able to dwell in the barn of the Lord today and forever more. We've been talking about it for millennia.

Now it's time to live like it.

If we want God to reign, if we want to give praise to the Good Shepherd, it's about time we act like it. Don't tell me you don't know what to do because it's plainly stated. In both Matthew and Ezekiel, God's judgment comes not because a profession of faith is wrong, but because *faithfulness* has not been mirrored in living. Because we who were created to be sheep are going around acting like rams.

God says through Ezekiel, "is it not enough that you have the pasture? must you consume it to the point that it can no longer yield its harvest?"

In this season we talk about abundance, as if everything there is, this great cornucopia of our creation, is ours for the taking...if only we can buy it or scheme it or grab it by force. Is not what God has given enough? Is creation a zero-sum game?

Abundance isn't about the power to consume, it's about the Shepherd who has provided *enough* — daily manna, daily bread a feast set even among our enemies — so that the weak and the strong, the he-goats and the rams *can dine together*...not in some saccharine future, but *here and now*.

The Good Shepherd does not ask the sheep to starve themselves, or to deny their pasture...only to ensure that "enough" is "enough" for all. That in life wherever we go, we leave our pastures better than we found them, not only for our own little camps, but for the *entire* flock of the Good Shepherd.

There are times when we relegate ourselves to our powerlessness and hand over our lives to despair, as if we are pawns in some global game.

It is precisely in those moments that God is shepherding us, leading us toward one another, so that we can (and here both Elijah and I lose track of the metaphor) do better, so that we can be sheep of the shepherd, receiving care, provision, and bounty from one another. And it's not hard to figure out what that means.

For Ezekiel it means enjoying good pasture and ensuring its provision,  
seeking the lost, bringing back the strayed, feeding the pasture,  
keeping the water clean,  
not trampling on the land.

For Jesus it means welcoming strangers, providing food for the hungry, giving the thirsty something to drink, clothing the naked, binding up the sick, visiting the imprisoned.

What does it mean for you? *Where have you seen the good sheep?*

I'll tell you that I have seen it here —

I saw it just last week in my Sunday school class,  
in chest compressions and prayer.

I've seen it in your Christmas budgets, when you've set aside money to provide gifts for children you will never meet over at the Magi Market.

I've seen you build ramps so that folks can have a more accessible homes,  
take time out of your schedules to serve at the free clinic  
and lead meetings of Moms Demand Action  
and raise funds to clean the Reedy River.

I've seen you cook hundreds of turkeys for local shelters,  
and advocate for affordable housing in our increasingly gentrified city.

I've seen it when you've asked after my wife and children,  
when you've invited us to your tables,  
when you've sought to learn rather than shut out.

In a million ways small and large I have seen this congregation, this flock  
acting like good sheeple of the Good Shepherd, being led and allowing yourself to follow in a  
way that points clearly to your identity.

but I've also seen exploitation.

There are times when all of us act more like rams than sheep.

When our self-interest gets in the way of our following,  
our greed in the way of our community  
when we lead from a place of scarcity,  
as if God's provision is lessened when it is shared.

The promise of the Reign of the Good Shepherd is not only that there will be enough. But also that we will be judged. And that's a good thing, because when we are judged we are reminded...

that we are sheep.

We're turned back toward our flock, our provision,  
And commanded to act like the sheep we were made to be,  
to care for one another like it,  
to welcome one another to our pasture,  
and, even after we've strayed, to enjoy the immense benefit  
of life under the Good Shepherd,  
the one who, unlike poor, misled Bo-Peep,  
will seek us out,  
bind us up,  
and bring us home *to the flock that attends to us*.

Ask yourselves this week and throughout this New Year —  
am I acting like a sheep of the Good Shepherd?

Or am I attempting to shepherd, to control, to lead in ways that I was never called to? Am I a ram  
(*and I apologize to rams*), or a member of the beloved community, where enough is enough, and  
we are one another's keepers.

This is not our pasture.  
It's not our flock.  
It's all God's.

God reigns  
and we are a mess  
of fickle  
feeble  
followers.

Sheep. It's the best thing we could be,  
And in this life, it's how we care for one another, love one another, and work with our Shepherd,  
to realize the Reign here and now, yesterday, today, and forever.

—Leigh Stuckey