

The Not-So-Good Shepherd
C. Gray Norsworthy
Johns Creek Presbyterian Church
November 22, 2020

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice. – Ezekiel 34:11-16, NIV

Our passage today talks a lot about sheep and shepherds. Not being an expert on either, I wanted to research this, so I began looking up all I could find out about shepherds and sheep. One person noted that in our day and time, since most of us do not have much contact with farm animals, (except to eat them), most of what she had learned about sheep and shepherds she learned in church from sermons about passages like this one!

I did discover that there is a magazine called *Sheep!* It is filled with articles about how to be a good shepherd or sheepherder, as they refer to it. One article was about a Benedictine Monastery in the Midwest that was established by monks from France who had been raising sheep since the 11th century. (*Sheep!* “Faithful Shepherds Share Flock Wisdom: Oklahoma’s Clear Creek Monastery” by Tim King) In the article, one of the Benedictine brothers and sheepherders said this: “Look at Chapter 10 of the Gospel of St. John. You’ll find a wealth of information on practical shepherding. It’s a gold mine.” Who knows? Maybe our passage today from Ezekiel offers some practical information -- but not about shepherding. Instead, I think it holds some good news about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

Now I am not sure what might have gone through the minds of those who first heard these words many years ago during the time of Ezekiel. Maybe they would remember some of the most familiar words in the Bible: The twenty-third Psalm. My mind certainly goes back to the words that I learned as a child in the King James Version of the Bible:

The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou *art* with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Psalm 23 reminds us that God is like a good shepherd -- one who takes care of us, comforts and guides us, leads us, and even feeds us like the good Jewish mother who prepares a good meal for the family she loves and cares for.

But at the time this passage from Ezekiel was written, the image of the good shepherd would have brought another person to mind – the king. In that time, the good king was supposed to be like a good shepherd. One scholar has written that in Israel's near eastern world, kings were expected to tend their subjects justly, especially those who are most vulnerable to abuse: widows, orphans, the poor, the infirm, and the displaced. Not only that, but Israel's past "shepherds" had neglected such responsibilities. (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI:1467) The good king, as a good shepherd, was to take care of his people or his flock – especially those who were most in need. But apparently, Israel had experienced some not-so-good shepherds or rulers.

I want to stop here and give us some context for the words we read earlier from Ezekiel. As we are experiencing today with this pandemic, Ezekiel also lived during a time of international upheaval. King Nebuchadnezzar had subdued Jerusalem in 597 BC. About 10,000 Jews including Ezekiel were then exiled to Babylon, where they joined others who had been exiled before. So, these words of Ezekiel are written to a people in exile.

I wonder what it was like to wake up every day knowing that you are in exile and you're not sure if or when you may ever go home again. And while the exile was not as harsh as being a slave in Egypt -- for example, Ezekiel lived in his own home and they were still able to worship Yahweh -- it was still exile. The first twenty-four chapters of the book of Ezekiel describe the judgement that would fall on Jerusalem because of her sins, and the exile was viewed as part of God's judgement.

However, that is *not* the final word. No, the final word can be seen in what we read this morning. Ezekiel tells those living in exile that God has not forgotten them and that one day, God as the Good Shepherd will bring back together his people who were scattered all over the nations of the world. God will restore them to their own land where they will find peace and justice. Like the Good Shepherd in the gospel of John that later describes Jesus, God will also search for the lost sheep and bring them home. God will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. God will shepherd the flock with justice -- which means setting things right, the way it should be. However, as a part of that justice, God will also bring an end to the not-so-good shepherds, whom Ezekiel describes as "the sleek and the strong." (Ezekiel 34:16, NIV)

Once again, one scholar has said that Israel's past shepherds had neglected such responsibilities, but Israel's divine King, Yahweh, shepherd the entire flock, including its weakest members. He adds that *how a society and its leaders treat those who struggle against disadvantages speaks volumes about that society's true values -- not the ones it professes to hold, but those revealed in policy and action.* (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI:1467)

So, Ezekiel is bringing good news of God as the Good Shepherd who will rule through good kings like King David. That is what it means to be a good shepherd. But what about those of us who are the sheep? What can we learn about who we are?

If you have never been around sheep, I can tell you two things I have learned about sheep over the years. First of all, *they are not that smart*. Actually, they are kind of dumb. They will follow the flock almost anywhere it goes -- even over a cliff. According to one news story from Turkey, back in 2005, 1500 sheep followed each other over a cliff! In other words, sheep tend to follow the crowd and they need guidance. They need someone like a Good Shepherd to help them find their way and to protect them – sometimes even from themselves!

Not only are sheep dumb, but *they also smell*. They are not the cleanest creatures around. Years ago, a church member once told me that his family used to raise sheep at their house. They also raised goats. He said that those who worked around both goats and sheep knew that if they were given a choice, they would rather hang out around the goats -- primarily because of the smell of the sheep. We could say what sheep need is a good bath. But I also found out that *how* you bathe them is important because bathing sheep the wrong way might ruin the wool and the lanolin that is found in the wool. So, sheep are dumb and they smell bad. Now, isn't it interesting that when the Bible wants to talk about the people of God, it often calls them (and us) "sheep"?

I guess that means that from time to time (maybe *all* the time) we are not that smart, *and* we need a good bath to get our act cleaned up. I know it's true with me. There are lots of times when I realize I need someone to help me find my way in life because, left to my own devices, I could end up as lost as that one sheep that needed to be found. I need God's wisdom and guidance in my life.

When it comes to getting my life "cleaned up" -- there are times when, if I am honest, I have to admit that parts of my life "stink." The choices I make in life, or the actions I *fail* to take are not the way I know I should live my life. I realize that I do need to "clean up my act." And I don't think it is accidental that one of our sacraments we observe is baptism. It is a ritual washing (a bath, so to speak) to help us "clean up our act" as we are washed in the waters of baptism. It symbolizes the work of God's grace to help us clean up our act.

However, maybe we don't often think of ourselves as lost sheep. I remember Paul Eckel, the former pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, saying that he didn't think of most Presbyterians as real, hard-core sinners. He thought they are more often like sheep who kept getting lost. He told the story of a sheep herder who was talking about his sheep one day and said this:

They aren't bad sheep. Not really. But they often just nibble a little grass here and nibble some there. Then they come to a hole in the fence and they know they should not go through, but there is a little grass on the other side of the fence and they just step through and nibble it. Then there is some over there, and then some a little farther off. And soon they are out of sight. They aren't really bad sheep; they just seem to nibble themselves lost.

I don't know where you are in your life today, but maybe you realize that you need some guidance in life – someone to help you find your way. Maybe you feel like the lost sheep in need of a shepherd. If so, you can call out to God, asking God to restore you and save you, and God will do just that. God will reach out to you and, like the shepherd who finds the lost sheep, God can lift you out of whatever mess you find yourself in and set you back on the right path.

Or maybe you want to think about it in terms of “getting your act cleaned up.” Maybe your plan in life isn't working all that well and you need someone who can help you get your act together. You need “a good bath.” The waters of baptism remind us that this is what God wants to do – clean us up so that we can live our lives the way God intended. So, if you are in need of wisdom and guidance, or if you are in need of a good bath to get you cleaned up, then Jesus the Good Shepherd can help you out.

When it comes to reading these words from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, I think there is a lot of hope and grace found in them. Granted, Ezekiel begins with how the people of Israel have sinned, which results in them winding up in exile. They had also been led by not-so-good shepherds. But God did *not* leave them in exile without hope. The final word is not judgment, but the hope and the promise of forgiveness and restoration. One day God would gather the scattered and lost sheep and bring them home. And until that time, God is still with them in exile. They are not alone. Friends, that is a word of grace. And even when we go through hard times that may feel like living in exile, maybe like this pandemic -- God is still with us and we are not alone. That is God's word of grace for us!

So, as we approach Thanksgiving this week, no matter how we may celebrate it, with or without family members in this pandemic, as hard as that may be, I want to invite you to say a prayer of Thanksgiving for God's grace that has been at work in your life. God has not abandoned us in this pandemic. One day, through the grace of God, this will end. Ultimately, God's order and justice will be restored. That is the promise from the Good Shepherd who cares for us, his sheep, with love and compassion. Thanks be to God!

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.