

Last Sunday after Pentecost Year B

“God Seeks Us”

26 November 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

**“Productive leaders solve problems; they don’t hide them.
Servant leaders transform societies (Anonymous).”**

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Hear today’s lesson from Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24:

11 For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 12 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. 13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. 14 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. 15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 16 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 . . .

20 Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21 Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, 22 I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. 23 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. 24 And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken (Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24).

The church designates today as the Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the Christian year. We look back across this last year and view Jesus as an infant, the suffering servant, and Risen Christ. Because Christ emptied himself of God’s authority and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross, God has highly exalted him and given him the name above every name—we note all of this today in worship. On the last day of the church year—Reign of Christ Sunday—Paul reminds us that “every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth should bow to him” (Philippians 2:6-10). Today we proclaim to the world that Jesus “is King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (Revelation 19:16).

Today’s Hebrew scripture lesson follows a passage in which Ezekiel condemns the shepherds of Israel, who have not taken care of the sheep. “You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep . . . With force and harshness you have ruled them,” Ezekiel writes (34:3-4). Today’s text is as if God says, “Step aside, shepherds, and let me show you how it’s done.”

Here is an amazing fact: we human beings are not very good at getting along with other human beings. For example, ponder this:

From the realm of science fiction to science fact, the Rosetta mission reached its climax . . . when the mission's scientists succeeded in landing a washing machine-sized probe named *Philae* on a moving comet after a 6.4-billion-mile journey. It has been a decade-long chase around the solar system for the spacecraft to catch up with its constantly moving target, **Churyumov-Gerasimenko**—better known as Comet 67P. For many who gaze dreamily at the stars above, this is one of the most exciting things to happen in recent memory.

Rosetta is an attempt to explore not only an object (comets) that we don't yet fully understand, but also reach backwards in time, like a detective, to piece together more about our origins. The mission calls on us to be bold, to take on risk. For an engineer, the challenge is like a *bourree* or *plie`* move in ballet. In other words, challenges such as ballet actions or movements that will call upon all her ballet skills to pull off (CNN).

Yet in the year 2014 (the last year that I found hard data) human beings are engaged in 10 wars and 8 serious armed conflicts (www.internationalrelations.com/wars-in-progress). If we were to superimpose the message from God that Ezekiel delivers to today, we might say that human relations has a lot to do with leadership—euphemistically what Ezekiel calls “shepherding.” That is if leadership is genuine, then those led will prosper. Hence, we examine the leadership of God in Christ when we speak of Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday.

Our reading from Ezekiel portrays a Godly-led search and rescue maneuver. God initiates the restoring of the lost and broken. Israel's national recovery and personal salvage for its citizens is possible because of divine mercy. Yet, mercy chooses sides in this case. Mercy certainly can embrace all, but instead chooses those who have profited at others' expense to face the consequences of their injustice—that is—bad kings. This choice becomes something of an overture to reconciliation. God's recovery of the lost restores persons: body, mind, and spirit. In this manner, God restores wholeness to the community broken through injustice and oppression.

The divine shepherd has specific care for the lost and defenseless and sick and hungry. Their pain causes God pain. Yet, God's pain and the pain of the helpless are not accidental; the actions and omissions of the well-fed (read here: Kings) contribute to the woe of the weak. This is at the core of Hebrew theologian A. J. Heschel's image of divine anguish. The smallest events are important because they matter to God and God's creatures. God's pursuit for justice and well-being leads to an initial bias toward the hungry and excluded. In the spirit of Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 40 and which we will read in just a few weeks when we get to Advent, “the valleys must be exalted and the mountains laid low” to achieve divine justice “on earth as it is in heaven.” The gap between the wealthy, poor, and middle class, destroys the nation, undermines justice, and also gives God pain.

Thus, in Ezekiel 34, Ezekiel ponders two primary notions:

- a) **how the prophet's society has come to the disaster of destruction and deportation**
- b) **and how to move forward beyond the disaster.**

Ezekiel reflects on the kings in Jerusalem, past and future, and does so under the symbol/image of “shepherd.” The Bible uses the notion of “shepherd” for “king,” an image that permits great flexibility in Ezekiel's revealing account. In verses 1-9, Ezekiel concludes that Israel's exile has come

because of poor kings: “You shepherds of Israel have been feeding yourselves . . . so they were scattered.” The result is sheep left high and dry to the “wild animals” both of political and military threat.

Then . . . suddenly there is a remarkable transition in Ezekiel’s argument. In verses 20-22, God engages in direct, personal rule. But then, in verses 23-24, without missing a beat, God resolves to designate a new human ruler over Israel. Thus, God entrusts God’s “direct rule” of God to [a] future human ruler—the Messiah which turns out to be Christ the King/Sovereign.

We quickly note three things about this promised ruler.

First, the ruler will be of the lineage of David. The Davidic dynasty so harshly condemned in the first verses will now be restored and renovated for effective governance.

Second, this new ruler is not called "king," but is a "prince." That is, God remains the real king, and the human, Davidic prince will be regent to affect God's good governance.

Third, the new leader will do the required work of a shepherd and feed the flock. That is, the new king will not be self-indulgent as the previous ones.

Thus, God is going to reconstitute the public order that will be in contrast to the old, failed order. Whether in ancient Israel or in the world of today, God rescues us when our leadership provides for the sheep and not the shepherds.

I close with Bob Dylan’s folk-ballad, *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, which catches the sense of Ezekiel’s prophecy quite effectively:

**Come senators, congressmen
Please heed the call
Don't stand in the doorway
Don't block up the hall . . .
There's a battle outside
And it is a ragin'
It'll soon shake your windows
And rattle your walls
For the times they are a changin'.**

Can you say: “servant leadership?” Amen.

David Neil Mosser, FUMC of Arlington, Texas 76011