

The Lord is My Shepherd

Ezekiel 34:11-15
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First Presbyterian Church
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I want to share with you the following job description, and then ask you a question. Here's the job description:

Duties: Feeding and caring for animals, which means finding pasture and water; Keeping track of every sheep in the flock; Knowing every sheep on sight; Providing shelter for sheep; Defending sheep against predators; Cleaning up after the sheep.

Person we're looking for: Probably doesn't have much of a family life; Doesn't mind being alone; Doesn't mind listening to the sheep bleating all the time; Finds sheep kind of interesting, even funny; Is really good with a staff; Knows how to use the crook.

Must be willing: To step in sheep dung occasionally; To live with the sheep day and night; To work without hope of appreciation or reward; To die for the sheep – that's how important these sheep are.

Compensation: Not much. We'll talk about that later.

Sounds like a great job, doesn't it? Maybe not.

Oh, and here's the question: Who here wants that job, to be a shepherd? What, no hands raised? I don't blame you.

Thankfully, as it says in our sermon titled, the Lord is my shepherd, our shepherd. Thank God we have a Lord willing to care for us like that.

In order to properly thank God for all the Lord does, let's spend some time this morning looking at what God says about who the Lord is for us, what he does for us, and who we are in the presence of the Lord, as a member of his flock, in the company of fellow followers.

The Prophet Ezekiel in today's Old Testament lesson gives voice to what God says about the people of Israel and their nation at that time. Of course, we – as the spiritual descendants of the Israelites, God's chosen people – we are invited to draw lessons for ourselves through God's word to them.

At the time of Ezekiel, the Israelites were exiled or sent away from the promised land of Canaan, to live as foreigners in the land of Babylon.

This fate fell upon them after years of living in sin and rebellion against God, as they sought to live by their own strength and wisdom, apart from God's provision and guidance.

Looking at the world today, looking at our families and communities, it's hard not to wonder if we are relying too much on our own strength and wisdom, living apart from God's provision and guidance.

We're thankful for those who love and follow the Lord, those who rely on God and seek to discern his will for our lives and our world. But it's certainly not the majority of people these days, at least not among those with all the wealth and power.

And it certainly wasn't the majority of people in the days of Ezekiel. As the prophet of God, Ezekiel stood alone as a faithful soul amid a fallen people. And here's his declaration: "The word of the LORD came to me (saying): 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?"

Ezekiel goes on to share in detail how the people of Israel failed as followers of the Lord God – they failed to strengthen the weak, to heal the sick, to bind up the injured, bring back those who purposefully strayed from the fold, and seek out those who just plain lost their way.

God is saying that the people whom he called and equipped to care for the least of these have become too focused on themselves. They've disregarded the needs of others and failed to seek out the lost sheep of the Lord, those who wandered away or were driven away from the care and protection God desires for all people.

It's a sad state of affairs, particularly when we realize just how neglected the elderly can be in our society, how overlooked and scorned the homeless are, how those who are sick can become so isolated and lonely, how those who are different from the norm suffer prejudice and cruelty.

We see the world as it is, and it grieves our hearts. And yet, we have reason to be thankful, thankful that as cruel as the world can be, the Lord never gives up on us. We are thankful, and we are humbled – humbled that, from time to time, we get to make a difference, we get to act as shepherd to the "least of these."

As followers of Christ, we are called to defend the weak and helpless, to challenge the powerful and privileged. When we see God's people in need, we are called to provide for them, provide access to food and shelter, care and compassion, resources and guidance.

This care and support, after all, is what God says all people should have. Using the metaphor of shepherd and sheep, God promises to "rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered," rescue them from all the hidden places in society, where the needy go unnoticed.

God promises to "bring them into their own land" – where they will have a place in society; to "feed them ... by the (waterways)" – where they will find provisions for daily life and the

comfort of cool water. God promises that “they shall lie down in good grazing land” – in comfort and safety – and “feed on rich pasture” – rising up to provide for themselves through the resources of the earth, which are God’s gift and blessing for all people.

And, says God, “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep I will seek the lost, ... bring back the strayed, ... bind up the injured, and ... strengthen the weak....”

“... But the fat and the strong” – those who only care about themselves, says God – “I will feed them with justice.”

We like to think that we live in a just society, and in some ways we do. But in too many ways, we as a society – and as individuals – we fall short of being good shepherds to those whom God has put under our care.

And yet, knowing what scripture says about the sheep and the goats – about the Lord separating people one from another, putting the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left – we know how we’re supposed to act and what we’re supposed to be doing.

We know that whatever we do to comfort and care for “the least of these,” as Jesus calls them, we do it for the Lord, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Knowing this, let us all look for ways to reach out to the needy who otherwise go unnoticed, to make space for them in society as fellow human beings, to create ways for all people to have access to basic necessities, to provide for their safety and care, and to enable them to one day care for themselves, providing for their own needs, with God’s help.

That is what it is to be a good shepherd, and to rely on and follow the Lord. So yes, the Lord is our Shepherd, and we are his sheep, his flock.

But we also, are supposed to be good shepherds to our fellow human beings, no matter how lost or needy they may be. For that is what it is to be a follower of the Lord. That is what it is to live into the future which God intends for us and for all people. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, whose love endures forever, whose faithfulness is to all generations, we turn to you as your grateful people.

We give thanks for the gifts of this past year, for all that has given us life, for all that has brought joy, for all sources of comfort, healing, and peace ...

We remember those who have shown us your love, whose faces reflect your image, whose actions have given us a glimpse of your work among us.

We lift up those who have shown forgiveness, whose words have encouraged, whose strength has made us stronger, whose service has inspired us to serve others.

We pray for those in need of healing and restoration. And we give thanks for all of the ways your divine hand moves among us, to rule over rulers, bring peace to the world, and restore creation as you intended.

Gracious God, we know that your gifts are not yet complete, that many of us still feel your steadfast love is distant.

Grant us the wisdom to know that our best appreciation for your gifts comes in sharing them with others, that your love is to be acted out, your justice is meant to be lived.

As we grow in our thanksgiving, may we come to live the prayer that was taught to us by the Lord, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.