

***THE WAY OF SHEEP***  
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University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: Ezekiel 34: 11-16 (NIV)**

**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 strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.**

I am very much aware that most modern people do not care for the idea that we are sheep and require a shepherd. I have had more than one person tell me that sheep are stupid animals and stink. Further, they insist, I am not their pastor and will never call me that, because it implies that they just might be sheep. These attitudes are complicated by the fact the most urban and suburban folks don't know the least thing about sheep and have difficulty following the pastoral images in the Bible. In fact many of the natural and agricultural references in the Bible are lost to us. And on top of all of that we are losing the ability for imaginative metaphor as we insist on logical and verifiable descriptions of life. It leads me to believe that most people are literalists at heart. There is no real difference between the fundamentalists who reads the Bible literally and embraces it and the liberal who reads the Bible literally and rejects it.

The lectionary reading for the Gospel this morning is from Matthew 25. It references the judgment where Jesus separates the sheep from the goats. As you recall the sheep were those who care for the least of our brothers and sisters by providing the hungry with food, the thirsty with water, the naked with clothing, and care for the imprisoned. The goats were condemned because they did not do these things.

Goats and sheep were essential to the economy of the first century in the ancient near east. It continues to be important today. They provided food, fleece, milk and cheese, and dung for fuel. About 75% of the world's population today eats goat meat. The contrast of sheep and goat behavior is very observable. Sheep are grazers and goats are browsers. Sheep usually keep a tight herd whereas goats may wander off from the herd. Goats are naturally inquisitive and masters of escape. Sheep are more timid and play it safe. Sheep insist that the lambs are fed. Goats are selfish and it's every one for him or her self.

I was curious about the contrast in these to readings this morning. Ezekiel makes it harder for us because he uses only sheep to describe the love of God for the people of Israel. There are no goats in the story I read to you. It is one flock that has scattered at the hint of rain or storm. One flock is spread out all over the countryside and as far away as other nations.

Ezekiel declares that the shepherd, Yahweh, will search for every last lamb, restore them to the flock, bind up the wounded ones, and provide them with nourishing green pasture. God will nurse them back to health. This image of God is very tender, insisting that God will personally care for them and make them lie down to rest. It sounds very much like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

And then Ezekiel makes a glaring statement. Yahweh will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak but will destroy the “sleek and the strong.” If you read further into the chapter, God will judge between one sheep and another and between rams and goats. The judgment is not between sheep and goats, but comes within their respective flocks.

What is the charge? Why must they be judged? In the first place they have trampled the pasture and muddied the waters. They eat the best grasses and stomp the remainder into mud. Other sheep or goats cannot feed. One of the things that drives me crazy is to watch our goats jump into our hay feeders. They will stomp down the hay and spoil it with their waste. The horses will not eat such hay. In the second place, Ezekiel arraigns the sheep and goats on the count of abusing the wounded and weaker members of the flock. They butt the weak with their horns and drive them away. The weaker members of the flock are subject to animals of prey and are denied the warmth and safety of the flock.

Jesus told the story by contrasting sheep and goats. Ezekiel holds up the fact that even within their respective flocks sheep and goats turn on each other. The sleek and strong overtake the weaker members of their families.

Now some of you might be arguing with me. You might be saying that, of course, the weaker members are forced out of the community. This is how nature works, keeping the strongest sheep or goats for the gene pool. Every breeder that I know of consciously tries to fertilize the ewes or nannies with proven rams and billies that are strong and sleek. Besides that, wolves and lions have to eat too. And that’s

when we lose the metaphor and become literalists. We are not talking about Wiltshire horn sheep or Golden Guernsey goats.

Ezekiel is using poetic language to talk about human communities. He is talking about God's justice that turns the values and assumptions of the animal kingdom upside down. He is claiming that we can treat one another with neither natural nor social determinism. Yes, in the animal kingdom the runt of the litter is often left to die of exposure. But that is not a value that carries over into God's kingdom. Yes, humans often try to reign over one another, be it the school bully or Josef Mengele, the Nazi death camp doctor. Human oppression and violence can never be justified in the kingdom of God.

A constant theme throughout the Bible is that God turns all of our assumptions upside down, always in favor of the runt, the dispossessed, the marginalized, and the poor. As a matter of fact, it is the sleek and strong ones that are denied the future.

The presumption of power and social position often seem impenetrable. People of status and fame often seem unassailable in their spheres of influence. But that is not the way of God's future. We have all known people who scramble and seduce, horn their way into position, butt and kick others out of the way, deceive and betray the ones who trust them, lie and push their way to the top. They inevitably falter and fall. One day they are going to find out that it is not about them. It is about the whole community. One day they are going to find themselves at the end of the line. They look far out to the front of the line and guess who is there? The weak ones are there, the wounded ones are there, and the ones they thought did not even deserve a place in the line are there.

Some might be thinking that this is just “preacher talk,” or religious hyperbole on my part. You might be thinking that this is really not the way of the world. But isn’t it? There is not a single empire in human history that did not eventually crumble under the weight of its superior assumptions, burdensome military spending, and imperial aspirations. Tyrants may rise up but they always fall. Every dubious plot that involves the abuse of others always reaches its denouement. This is the ever slow but arching course of God’s way in the world. It is true for us as persons and churches, corporations and nations. I am not talking about those nasty old goats. I am talking about us.

I think about the trial that took place in a small town in Mississippi. The prosecuting attorney called his first witness, an elderly grandmother. He approached the witness box and said, “Mrs. Jones, do you know me?”

She replied, “Yes, Mr. Williams, I have known you since you were a little boy, and quite frankly, you’ve been a big disappointment to me. You lie; you cheat on your wife; and are a terrible gossip. You think you’re a big shot when you don’t even realize that you don’t have the brains to realize you’ll never amount to anything more than a two-bit paper pusher. Yes, I know you.”

The prosecutor was totally stunned. Not knowing what else to do he pointed across the room and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know the defense attorney?”

“Why yes, I do,” she replied. I’ve known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster too. He’s lazy, bigoted, and has a drinking problem. He can’t build a normal relationship with anyone, and his law practice is one of the worst in the entire

state. Not to mention he cheated on his wife with three different women. One of them was your wife. Oh, yes, I know him.”

The defense attorney nearly died. The judge asked both counselors to approach the bench. In a very quiet voice he said, “If either of you idiots asks her if she knows me, I’ll send you both to the electric chair.”

What I wonder is why we so often refuse to learn from the wisdom of prophets like Ezekiel – or Jesus or Buddha for that matter. We tell the preachers we don’t want to hear about the judgment of God, or the anger of God, as if we really understood the depth of God’s passion for human dignity. I guess it is OK if we are angry but God forbid that God should give a damn! And yes, that was an intentional play on words.

Or to put it another way, has it ever occurred to us what the world might look like if the strong and sleek made sure that all the sheep had good food and clean water? What if the powerful and elegant went looking for the lambs that have wandered away from the fold and brought them home? What if potent corporate leaders opened clinics for the weak and aged sheep who can barely stand on their own four legs? What if our prayer every morning us, “Thank you for your providence, God, but we’re taking care of things. We are going to carry the burden. Everyone is covered. We only pray for Your hope and inspiration.”

I do not care how short Kim Kardashian’s marriage lasted. In fact, if I never heard the name again I would be just fine. I am not concerned that Demi Moore is divorcing Ashton Kutcher. I do not need to know the next time Charlie Sheen throws a drunk. I would really rather not hear about Justin Bieber’s DNA. And God bless them, it is not for me to speculate whether the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge are

expecting. I sometimes wonder if the media, especially television, is America's social propofol. It sure seems like we sleep through most of our lives and the challenges that confront us. At best the Kingdom of God is only a dream.

There are deeper and more important questions for us to ask about our community and the future of the nation. Ezekiel thought that the leadership of ancient Israel might consider how they were going to care for the nation, most especially the ones at risk. He challenged them to consider the weak and wounded, the aged and orphaned, and the wounded veterans. Ezekiel wondered how Kansas is going to care for the mentally ill if funding is slashed for their services as the governor proposes. Are there enough emergency room beds for them or jail cells to take them in? Secretary of State Kris Kobach is planning on introducing strong immigration legislation in January. It will be similar to the laws he helped write in Arizona and Alabama. Ezekiel wants to know, Mr. Kobach, how such legislation can not only guarantee legal processes for immigration but how such legislation will also protect families and safeguard their children. When can we have a humane conversation about border security, and naturalization processes for the 12 million illegal immigrants who are already here and worker cards that would allow companies to hire immigrants on a short term basis for labor in such fields as agriculture. What do our trade policies have to do with workers wages and rights in Mexico and other nations? How can we keep these conversations from being xenophobic and racist?

Like Ezekiel or not, these are the sacred questions that God puts before us. How will the sleek and strong, powerful and influential care for the weak and wounded? It seems to me if there is one single issue in the entire Bible this is it. It is

a complicated and difficult question that I cannot always answer. But I cannot evade the question. I cannot run away from it or shove it off onto someone else. Whatever strength I have, God claims it for the defenseless. That is the only possible future that I will have with any glimmer of real hope. Consider this prayer that was offered at a Taize service:

Dear Lord,

We lift up to you the poor and the marginalized.

We know that these are your cherished ones; that you are a God whose heart cries out for justice; that you are a God who longs to feed the hungry. We ask simply, Lord, that you give us your heart.

Fill us Lord with your compassion, give us your eyes to see, give us boldness and selflessness and wisdom, so that we too might cry out for justice and feed the hungry, so that your light might shine throughout the earth.

Lord, we especially lift up the children among us who are poor and marginalized, finding themselves in circumstances they did not choose and helpless to change. We lift up AIDS orphans, children of war, children suffering abuse and neglect, children smitten with malnutrition and disease, lacking education, housing or the most basic of life's necessities. Might they somehow come to know the love of their Creator, who knows each hair on their head and collects their tears.

Lord, you know every wretched tale. Every overwhelming statistic, you know personally, one by one. Thank you that one day you will make all things right through your Son, Jesus Christ.

Until that day, let us be tireless in doing what is good and what is right unto the least of these, knowing the Father's love for them.

Amen<sup>1</sup>

*FINIS*

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<sup>1</sup> Author unknown, A Ruach Journey: Reflections on the Spiritual Life (corrected), <http://ruach.wordpress.com/2008/04/29/prayer-for-the-poor-and-the-marginalized/>, downloaded 11/19/11