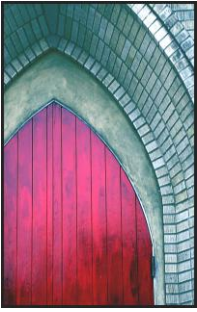


The Shepherd of My Sheep

Text: Ezekiel 34.11-16



ROYALTY

It's funny to me how drawn my 5 year-old daughter is to the idea of being a princess. The concept of a monarchy is so foreign to every other experience in her life. Our country was founded in direct opposition to the idea of a ruling family. Yet, thanks to Disney, my daughter couldn't imagine life without the thought of being a princess.

The concept is foreign to most of us, and yet it is central to an accurate understanding of the Bible. In Ezekiel 34, we hear God speaking through His prophet to the shepherds of Israel. There are two key ways this word is applied in the Old Testament. Most important, the shepherd imagery applies to God himself as the shepherd of His people.^{cf. Ps 23; 78.52; 80.1; Is 40.11; Jer 31.10} The other application of the imagery of a shepherd is to kings and those under them who rule over God's people.^{Ps 78.70-72; Jer 2.8; 23.1-6} In the New Testament, however, the 'shepherd' (and the related imagery) is applied as a description of those in church leadership.^{Jn 21.15-19; Ac 20.28; Eph 4.11; 1 Pe 5.1-4} As strange as the concept of royalty (or shepherding) may be to our ears, it is the cross-section of these ideas where we need to hear these words of Ezekiel this morning.

EZEKIEL 34.11-16

¹¹"For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹²As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³And 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 ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

DO I BELONG?

Some time ago, I went to a concert in which a friend of mine was performing. I showed up just a few minutes early, and as soon as I had made my way past the ticket counter, I was greeted with the words "what are you doing here?" Looking back, the data tells me I didn't need an answer to that question. 1) It was a public event. 2) I had paid the price for admission. 3) I was invited to the show. I wish that I could tell you that this information was enough to put my conscience at ease. I wish that I could tell you that with sincere confidence I brushed it off and took my seat. But to be honest, I couldn't. This

question (surely not intended to have this effect) cut into me. It made me question my place; it brought out in my own insecurities. I want people to like me. And even more, I want to belong. I don't want to have to work at these things. It just took a simple question.

Do you ask that question—do I belong here? Am I supposed to be at church, worshipping with God's people? Where does that question come from? I bring this up because of the four descriptions we see at the end of our text: "*the lost . . . the strayed . . . the injured . . . the weak.*"^{ver. 16} This church is ministry-minded enough that when we hear these words in context, immediately names, faces, and circumstances of people we love come to mind. And we also can't help but see ourselves in these descriptions. My concern is not that we are looking at one another and saying "you don't belong here" (though there is certainly room for repentance in this for us). My concern is that we would be too quick to believe that we ourselves don't belong here. There is much in our lives that disorients enough to make it seem like we don't fit. You have serious doubts about who God is, and whether or not He's even real. You have been hurt by the church. You have assumptions about the lives of the people around you. You are weary from a week spent putting up with an employer who doesn't appear to give much thought to his employees, and to clients whose desires never seem to be satisfied. It might even be any numbers of things that more generally affect how you live your life and how you see the world. Whatever it may be, there's often a nagging thought in the back of our minds that we might as well give up, because we simply don't fit.

In the midst of these fears, I want us to be set at ease that in fact we do belong here. Broadly speaking, we see God's response to our fears, doubts, and questions in verses 11-12. He tells us repeatedly that He is a shepherd who pursues His sheep. He says us no less than four times in these two verses ("*will search for . . . will seek them out . . . will I seek out . . . I will rescue*"). These words come in sharp contrast to the self-absorbed, abusive, and neglectful leadership of the human shepherds of God's people.^{34.1-10} God pursues people who wonder whether or not they belong anywhere, and He rescues them. The theme of the remainder of this text is what God's rescue of His people entails.

RETURNING HOME

If we face disorientation and a strong sense that we don't belong, we realize that part of what we're looking for is a place to call home. We need something that is both familiar and safe. This is part of God's rescue of His people and shows up most clearly in verse 13 with the promise "*I will bring them into their own land.*" At this point in the life of God's people, they have conquered by Babylon, the city of Jerusalem has been leveled, and most of the people have been taken far away. They are described repeatedly in this chapter as "*scattered.*"^{34.5, 6, 12, 21} The promise of God is to gather them together, to take them home—"*the mountains . . . the ravines . . . all the inhabited places*"^{34.13} They had become like hunted game to their

enemies^{34.5, 8} and now God has brought them to safety. God promises to take them out of the place of danger and fear, and to gather them as a people at home.

This passage is a helpful guide for us in gaining a proper understanding of applying the Old Testament to present day circumstances. In every verse in this text, God is the One taking action. He is moving to save His people, a people who have repeatedly wandered away from Him and have always been and always are dependent upon His grace. And He has chosen to move towards them in the midst of their sin. At the same time, this passage comes in the greater context of a rebuke of the leadership of God's people—spoken to that leadership.^{cf. 34.9} Therefore, with an understanding that God alone works salvation in the lives of His people, there is a place for us to hear a call to repentance when our ways stand opposed to His ways, and therefore a call to change. As a local church, a gathering of God's people, is there a temptation for us to live scattered lives? Geography isn't as much a problem as cluttered living and allowing technology to keep one another at comfortable distances. We're called to oppose our own scattering by meeting together regularly for worship and encouragement,^{Heb 10.24-25} that our relationships with one another would be places of familiarity and safety. The work that God is doing in salvation comes through the gathering of His people.

MEETING BASIC NEEDS

God is committed to receiving our praise for His salvation^{Is 48.11}—and this means that salvation is God's work from beginning to end. And the people God return home, He also nourishes them that they might grow. Following the shepherd imagery of verses 14 and 15, we see two things in particular: food and rest. He speaks of “good pasture . . . good grazing land . . . rich pasture.”^{ver. 14} In context, the human shepherds of Israel were failing in this basic task of a shepherd, and were in fact far more concerned about their own hunger than that of their sheep.^{34.2-3} To this God adds that he “will make them lie down.”^{ver. 15} This is all about God providing for the most basic needs of His people.

This is the most basic of needs—it's nearly part of the definition of what it means to be a shepherd. It's akin to new parents and a crying baby. For the most part, a baby is going to cry because of one of a small list of things—hungry, tired, diaper—and acting on those simple answers before addressing more complex needs. It's an auto-mechanic doing basic maintenance on a car—oil, gas, air in the tires—to keep it running smoothly before he tries to assess more complex problems.

Scripture is clear for us that our physical needs are in God's hands, and that He alone is our provider.^{Mt 6.25-34; 2 Cor 8.1-15} Jesus adds to this the knowledge that our most basic and deepest needs are to know God and to live in fellowship with Him.^{Mt 4.4; Jn 15.4-5; Jn 17.3} We have the word of God, which is “useful.”^{2 Tim 3.16-17; cf. Heb 5.12-13} He gives us His Spirit to work in us by guiding us through His word,^{Jn 14.25-26; 16.12-15} Even more, God has given us to one another as members of His church.^{Eph 4.11-14; Rom 12.3-8; 1 Cor 12} as we seek to grow. There is a call here for us to respond to God's provision by seeking Him, our greatest need, through the means He has provided.

RULING WITH GRACE

If we were to break from the shepherding metaphor and pick up the picture of young parents caring for a new baby or a

mechanic taking care of his car, all of us know that there are more complex things that both babies and cars can face. Notice, then, the way the work of the Lord—the True shepherd—is aligned with the specific needs of His sheep as He rules over them. There are some who are “lost” and in danger of losing their lives. Those He goes after. Others have “strayed,” wandering away from the flock, and those He promises to bring back. Others know pain in their brokenness—they are “injured”—and He tends to their specific wounds. Still others in the flock are “weak” and limited in what they can do, even the smallest of tasks sometimes taking great energy. God promises to strengthen them. God doesn't give a time frame; nor does He go into detail as to how. But His word stands fast.

It is not only the specific needs of His sheep of which God promises to be aware. He knows that there are other sheep in the flock who will not remain. They are “the fat and the strong,” those who take advantage of other sheep and live for themselves.^{cf. 34.17-19} They are promised a final, irreversible judgment. Again, God does not give a specific time-frame, but His Word stands fast.

I mentioned earlier that this congregation has proven, time, and again, to be ministry-minded. When I came with my wife interview here almost 6 ½ years ago, this was evident. And this has only become more clear to me as I have seen the elders, and the deacons, and many, many others drop everything on a moment's notice to go and serve. There is certainly room for growth in this for us. But what God Himself models for us is a knowledge of the sheep—He knows who needs strength, and He knows who has wounds that need bandages. And He knows who needs to be corrected and opposed.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

I want to return to where we started—to the question of whether or not we belong here. There is much in us and around us that seems to give this question validity. Whether it's an overt struggle with God, deep hurts in our lives, or even general weariness, it doesn't take much for us to feel set apart from everybody else, to feel like we simply don't belong. This passage challenges those notions.

God says to us that He's the one who goes looking for those who are lost, and brings back those who have strayed. If you're lost or straying, this is a place for you, because God Himself brings people like you here. God promises to treat our wounds so that we can find healing. In our weakness, when we think there is nothing we can do, God promises to give us strength. To those with loved ones who are lost, straying, injured, and weak, know that God holds true to His word. Because Oak Hills is a gathering of God's people who are committed to worshipping Him through Jesus alone, this is a place where God promises to be at work.

We approach God in these places of need because that's all we have. And we need more than insight; we need more than ideas. We need a Savior. Jesus says “*I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.*”^{Jn 10.11} As the good shepherd, “*he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*”^{Jn 10.3} The work of the shepherd king is to go after His sheep and call them by name, to gather them, meet their basic needs, and to rule over them. May we see our Good Shepherd more clearly, that His ways would guide our ways, and may He would conquer us and rule over us in grace and truth.