

“The Shepherd King”
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

This Sunday marks the end of the Christian liturgical calendar year. This is our “New year’s Eve,” a time we celebrate the reign of Christ. The new year begins next week with the start of Advent. This Sunday, we are fast approaching the end of a calendar year as well: 2020, a year that—for most of us—cannot end too soon. We have been through a lot this year due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

You know, we all take time to look back at the year just ending. Most years, I look back and count the things I was able to do—able to visit friends, able to go to a concert or ballgame, able to take a trip to someplace I’ve always wanted to visit, able to go to worship every Sunday. If in previous years I counted what I was able to do, 2020 is my year of the “unable to do.” Many of the things I wanted to accomplish, I couldn’t. This has been true for all of us. And while we’ve found workarounds for some of our activities or discovered alternatives, most of us will remember 2020 as the year of things left undone. This leaves me feeling, well, a little down.

When I come to our scripture lesson for today, I start out with a similar sinking feeling for all the things that have been undone.

- We hear from the prophet Ezekiel who is speaking to a people who are in exile, explaining to them why their circumstances have brought them to this individual and national trauma.
- They are in exile because their leaders have failed to take care of them: they have led Israel away from God, into destructive military alliances with other nations, and the society into oppressive economic and social practices that enriched the wealthy and exploited the poor.
- A little earlier in Ezekiel 34, the word of God is proclaimed against the leaders of Israel, who are styled as shepherds: “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves!...You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.”
- The leaders, the shepherds of Israel, the ones responsible for keeping the people have themselves gone astray.
- God’s charges against them were severe: “You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd” (Ezekiel 34:4-5).

If we have ears to hear, these words penetrate our own hearts today because in many ways, our world is not so different from that of Ezekiel’s.

- Leaders still fight more for their own interests, their power, their comfort, over caring for those they are charged to lead.
- We face growing inequities in wealth between those with the most and those with the least.
- Healthcare is inadequate, excluding many people who need its services the most.
- Our culture has become harsh and inconsiderate as we fail to hear the voices of those in need. Instead, we are coming to champion diatribe over genuine debate, demonizing an opponent over open-minded listening, violence over conflict resolution.
- Biblical injunctions to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien in the land are made subservient to the “me-first” selfishness of the well-to-do.

I am not saying that there is no compassion, no mercy, no generosity toward the most vulnerable today; it’s just that it seems harder to find.

The word that jumps out for me in Ezekiel’s complaints against the shepherds of Israel in this passage is “scattered.” That’s the outcome after the leaders of Israel took care of themselves rather than their people. They were scattered.

- Scattered is what you get when you drop a bag of marbles on the floor—they roll off in every direction, and they don’t stay together.
- A scattering of something is random, there’s no particular order...in fact, it’s chaos.

- We say someone is scatterbrained when they're having a hard time concentrating or making sense—a feeling I am acquainted with from time to time.
- Scattershot, now there's another good word; if you are scattershot in your work then you're not aiming to accomplish anything in particular...so don't be surprised because "anything in particular" is precisely what you'll hit.

Maybe scattered is what we are feeling today in this time of pandemic. Maybe, along with all the other challenges we face, our lives have become scattered because after months of the pandemic, we've lost the sense of stability that comes with our regular schedules and activities. What's especially troubling is we're missing the connectedness that comes with seeing one another in person. If we live in a time of the "undone" and our lives seem scattered to the hills, then we are feeling the pain Ezekiel felt for his people.

The word of God that came through Ezekiel was one of judgment against the bad shepherds who led the people astray. But along with judgment there is also a word of hope.

"For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 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" (Ezekiel 34:11-12).

God has determined to act. God will rescue God's people. God will reverse the scattering and will gather the lost.

"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..." (Ezekiel 34:16).

Here God promises to reverse the negative effects of the bad shepherds, the ones who practiced injustice and exploited the weak. And make no mistake, God is coming for the oppressive shepherds:

"I myself will judge between the fat sheep [the bad shepherds] and the lean sheep [the vulnerable people]. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide...I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged" (Ezekiel 34:22-22).

What emerges here is a picture of God's coming kingdom, of judgment against the exploiters who oppress the people. Those who push and shove and bully and chase away the weak until they are scattered will be held to account. God's kingdom will be one where these selfish behaviors are not tolerated and will not exist. God's kingdom is ushering in true peace, the shalom of God, where all needs are met, justice is fulfilled, and all peoples live in right relationship with God and neighbor.

How God accomplishes this is by appointing a single shepherd, one chosen and anointed by God to bring about God's kingdom, that it may be on earth as it is in heaven. In Ezekiel, this shepherd is known as a servant from the house of David. To Christian ears, we hear this as a sign pointing to Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. He who is called the good shepherd will gather, and feed, and heal, and strengthen the people of God. This is God's word about the Savior who was to come, who came, and who will come again in final victory over sin and death.

- We know this savior as the holy one of God.
- We know him because God revealed Jesus as the one in and through God is working to redeem the world.

Remember the words of Jesus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Because we know God is as good as God's words, the appropriate response to God is twofold:

- **We join in the rescuing, redeeming, restoring work of God.** A big part of Christian faith and tradition holds that God acted in human history to save the world. Jesus saves us by grace through faith in the Son of God. But we are not saved from sin for no particular reason. There's a saying that "we are not just saved **from** something but **for** something." God has a purpose in calling people into eternal life through Jesus. That purpose is to join in God's healing and restoring action toward people and toward all creation. These words from the prophet Micah are familiar: "And what does the Lord require of you O mortal but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). When we give to others to alleviate human suffering, that is taking part in the healing work of God. When we seek justice

and fight against the conditions that cause poverty, abuse, addiction, violence, and more, we are taking part in God's restorative work.

- **And, we give thanks to God for what God is doing.** We may be in a bad place. We may have suffered embarrassment or loss. We may not be taken seriously by others at times. Our hearts may be breaking. But even so, we give thanks. The Apostle Paul advised us to live in what we would call "an attitude of gratitude." "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). We give thanks because we know God loves us and will never abandon us, no matter what comes our way.

Thanksgiving is the main message from Psalm 100:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

As we approach the end of this year of the pandemic...the year of the undone...the year of scattering, let us remember to be grateful to God, our Good Shepherd, who has come to our rescue.

- Let us remember to give thanks for God's liberating act in Jesus Christ; for God is in the world, reversing the injustice of the proud and powerful, and healing and building up the weak.
- Give thanks to God for our Good Shepherd, for Jesus, who leads us in the ways of mercy and love that bring us to life eternal.
- Let us give thanks to God for the many thousands of healthcare professionals who are, even now, engaged in a great battle between life and death with the Covid-19 virus. May we do all in our power to help them in this fight.
- And, let us give thanks for God's coming kingdom, where death will be no more; pain and suffering, bullying and cajoling; insult and injury; violence and war will no longer be remembered; and where God's peace, which passes all human understanding, will be in the hearts and minds of all who dwell in hope.
- Give thanks for our shepherd king, for Jesus Christ, who gathers and heals and renews God's good creation.
- Find something for which you are thankful this year.
- Give thanks!

Amen and A men!