

Message from Pastor John
May 3, 2020

Ezekiel

341-6 God's Message came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherd-leaders of Israel. Yes, prophesy! Tell those shepherds, 'God, the Master, says: Doom to you shepherds of Israel, feeding your own mouths! Aren't shepherds supposed to feed sheep? You drink the milk, you make clothes from the wool, you roast the lambs, but you don't feed the sheep. You don't build up the weak ones, don't heal the sick, don't doctor the injured, don't go after the strays, don't look for the lost. You bully and badger them. And now they're scattered every which way because there was no shepherd—scattered and easy pickings for wolves and coyotes. Scattered—*my sheep!*—exposed and vulnerable across mountains and hills. My sheep scattered all over the world, and no one out looking for them.

God, the Master, says: From now on, *I myself* am the shepherd. I'm going looking for them. As shepherds go after their flocks when they get scattered, I'm going after my sheep. I'll rescue them from all the places they've been scattered to in the storms.

John 10:1-10 **The Message (MSG)**
He Calls His Sheep by Name

101-5 "Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good—a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it."

6-10 Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal

and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.

The Good Entrepreneur would be generous and careful of the interests of his investors....A bad one would only concern himself with his own profit... That might be the way a modern version of this story would start so it makes sense that in an economy based on agriculture and animal husbandry that the image of a Shepherd and flock is a common picture in the Bible.

The words of Ezekiel and the claim of Jesus to be the Good Shepherd are the two most prominent.

Ezekiel starts by telling us about the characteristics of the BAD shepherd: "You drink the milk, you make clothes from the wool, you roast the lambs, but you don't feed the sheep. You don't build up the weak ones, don't heal the sick, don't doctor the injured, don't go after the strays, don't look for the lost. You bully and badger them."

The indictment is that those with power and influence have used their place to advance their own interest and have neglected the public values of compassion and care. I do not think Ezekiel means these are particularly wicked individuals. I think he is criticizing any situation or system where power and access have been arranged so that those on the margins, the weak and the needful, suffer.....while the "Shepherd" profits. The responsibilities of shepherding have been lost, the relationship between sheep and shepherd has been forgotten.

Having told us what is wrong and how human weakness and human nature is selfish he cries out that the ONLY answer is for God to be the Shepherd. For God who is above human frailty to rule with justice and mercy. For God is the ONLY ONE who will care for others, with the quality and security required! The decree echoes from the throne of God. God is going to rule directly and present us with an alternative so that we get a picture of what life should be like. This God is not much interested in religious matters but this God is fully engaged in the way society works and how the individual is treated!

But God does not rule directly out of the sky. God rules through structures and agents and institutions and there will come a Good Shepherd, a real shepherd, a new dynasty, a new order, which will be what all the other shepherds were supposed to be: agents of justice, righteousness, peace, dignity, humaneness. Now Ezekiel does not claim that the real shepherd has come, but promises that it shall BE.

Amongst those who heard Jesus directly, some, including John the Baptist, were unclear so they sent a messenger, "Are you the Messiah?" And Jesus sent word back, "Go tell John that justice has begun, that righteousness is underway, that peace is on the move: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, the poor have their debts cancelled."

Many were offended by this and they sought to kill Jesus because they did not want such a public order. They liked it the other way when public life was based on greed and fear.

In Gospel of John, Jesus clearly chooses to put himself in the shepherding role to describe his relationship to his followers. In doing so, he placed himself firmly in the prophetic tradition of Ezekiel, which describes God as the good shepherd who cares for the sheep. By calling himself the "good shepherd" in John, Jesus identifies himself as fulfilling the role and promises of God.

We as Christians have discerned and believe that in Jesus of Nazareth there a shepherd has come. That Jesus's claim is true.

John says: "they had no idea what he was talking about. So, he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of."

Real and eternal life, abundant life...that is the promise of Jesus.

The human mind, our consciousness is an amazing and unique gift. When we consider life, we can mentally stand back from ourselves and our world and

reflect on how it is and how it should be. We live not just in the present but through memory ...the past...and through imagination ...the future.

Yet it only takes a moment to realize that the past has its fair share of sorrow and regret.

While the future is unknown and mysterious.

One especially important way we can carry that burden of mixed joy and sorrow.

One way we can dispel past regret and future fear is in the making and keeping of promises so that we are never totally alone. Never left wandering and lost, without purposeful direction or nurturing home, but rather with a sense of certainty and courage.

That is what Jesus brings. The promise of never being alone. The promise that we sheep will never be scattered so far that we are lost forever. The promise that life should be, could be and will be good. Abundant, full, not empty and lacking. The promise that we have a Good Shepherd who will look after our every need and every moment of our existence.

Jacques Derrida, the philosopher, called this belief “the insanity of grace.” What a wonderful phrase to describe the Good News “the insanity of grace”.

“Insanity” because it stretches our knowledge beyond what experience tells us is true. (We must be crazy to believe it.)

“Grace” because, and here we see the truth of Ezekiel, it must come from beyond humanity.

Jesus IS the Good Shepherd! The one who leads, protects, and who feeds us, in every way so that life is abundant for every one of us.

“I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.

Shepherd, bless us and keep us. Amen.