

Ezekiel 34 - Israel's False Shepherds

34 The word of the LORD came to me: ²Mortal, 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? ³You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴You 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. ⁵So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

⁷Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸As I live, says the Lord GOD, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; ⁹therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰Thus says the Lord GOD, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.

God, the True Shepherd

¹¹For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As 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. ¹³I 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 watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights

of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says 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, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

¹⁷As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: ¹⁸Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? ¹⁹And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?

²⁰Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²²I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

²³I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

²⁵I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. ²⁶I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. ²⁷The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. ²⁸They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. ²⁹I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. ³⁰They shall know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel,

are my people, says the Lord GOD. ³¹You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture^[a] and I am your God, says the Lord GOD.

Matthew 25 - The Judgment of the Nations

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,^[a] you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Kerra Becker English

“The King of the Sheeple”

Ezekiel 34; Matthew 25: 31-46

November 26, 2017

To get us started today, I'd like to read a paragraph written by Gordon Matties, professor of biblical studies and theology from Canadian Mennonite University. Dr. Matties has done extensive writing on the book of Ezekiel, and what I'm about to read comes from his preface to the book of Ezekiel in my study Bible.

He says, *“In Ezekiel’s world, superpower politics and small-scale ethnic nationalism were buttressed by idolatrous practices that legitimized military alliances, violent crimes, and oppressive economic policies. In the face of Israel’s disintegrating independence and identity, old theological certainties collided with the massive shock of warfare, destruction, and deportation. Surrounded by political deportees suffering the consequences of imperialistic terror, Ezekiel presents a barrage of evocative, disturbing, bizarre, and unconventional responses to the trauma of exile. Ezekiel’s goal is to reconstitute a people whose character corresponds to the holiness of the Lord, and whose identity declares the Lord’s righteousness and justice among the nations.”*

I love the description he uses of Ezekiel’s language as a prophet. He calls it “evocative, disturbing, bizarre, and unconventional.” No joke. Ezekiel is responding to this large-scale trauma that includes war, displacement, violence, and economic oppression, and he does so with the kind of visions one would expect to hear from someone hallucinating on powerful narcotics. Ezekiel is not above the use of drama and theatrics to make his point. Prophets have been like

this from the beginning, and contemporary prophets sometimes take their cues from the likes of Ezekiel. As our own daily news continues to barrage us with scandal after scandal, and increasing violence has us afraid, and national policies are on the table that seemed aimed at destroying the poor, what kind of drama will it take to wake us up, to open our eyes? And then, what kind of vision do we need to feel hope and put our trust in the God who promises restoration, even in the bleakest of times?

Ezekiel seems to have lived through it all. Again quoting Dr. Matties, “The Exile forced Ezekiel to explain Israel’s defeat, Jerusalem’s destruction, and massive deportation in the light of a vision of divine glory; a glory that departs in judgment and returns in hope to a resurrected people in a peaceful and just land.” Ezekiel is the prophet who imagines a valley of dry bones coming together, bone to bone, sinew to sinew, and God will breathe life into them again. It’s weird and beautiful all at the same time. It is an image of resurrection, a trust that God is able to bring life out of death. But to trust in such a God when the pain and trauma is that great doesn’t always make sense to us. Matties notes that Ezekiel’s continues to seek redemption on God’s behalf in all this, but it isn’t easy. He says, “God wishes to restore the divine reputation in the world and to dwell among a transformed community. To accomplish these goals, God must deal with the pride of nations, their aggressive exploitation, and violence.” That reorientation doesn’t always happen so easily.

And yet, this is a repeated theme, as you well know, in scripture, and in the ongoing course of living out our lives of faith throughout history. There will be periods of destruction and in such destruction, will we continue to find hope that God is with us and working toward the transformed community?

Ezekiel wishes to “speak restoration and newness into that shattered world.” Which is where this turn in the book takes us. Ezekiel has this descriptive chapter of sheep and shepherds – but we all know he’s not really talking about sheep and shepherds here, right? He’s talking about humankind and their leaders. Ezekiel blames the leaders, in God’s voice, for taking advantage of and exploiting God’s people. They have forgotten to be mediators of God’s justice and kindness. They have lost a position of holiness, a position that God is intent to restore.

So, Ezekiel the prophet speaks truth into that power, but not in the ways we usually think of doing that. He’s not getting worked up about the news. He’s not starting a letter writing campaign to government officials. Instead he seeks out the wounded, the traumatized, those who were battered and broken by their life circumstances, and he reminds them that God has something more in mind for them. God is on their side, and will de-throne those who have sought power for their own benefit.

The one who legitimately gets to be called the true shepherd, the only shepherd will be the one who claims that authority for the benefit of the people. The Davidic shepherd, the King over all these Sheeple, must always keep love for God’s people first and foremost in any decision, in any action, and with every consequence in mind. This text gets tied to Jesus for that reason. In his own teaching, Jesus will claim this benevolent Shepherd status, as the metaphorical stand in for his own royal lineage. This is the difference, as I have learned it in my experience, between authority and power. Jesus operates with divine authority to enact God’s understanding of love for and care of the people. But these false shepherds use and abuse their power for their own gain, without regard for who and what they hurt in the process. Power can corrupt. Genuine authority requires a deep sensibility for those in his or her charge.

In many ways, perhaps it is best to let Ezekiel continue speak this divine oracle as an eternal blessing for those who feel lost and forgotten and as a perpetual judgment on those who lead or govern or simply act without compassion. I believe this chapter speaks the truth to our world today, but I have a deep suspicion that it could be read in many times and contexts and continue to have just about the same impact. To me that is both sad in that it seems we haven't come very far, and it is encouraging that God's showers of blessing are promised, and re-promised to the nth generation.

So I'm going to read from Ezekiel again, this time, the whole chapter, to remind us of who God is in the midst of trauma, and to help us remember that the good and true Shepherd King never abandons his flock, even when they are struggling.

