

“Be a Leader: Follow the Shepherd!”

Ezekiel 34:11-16

Intro

One of the most widely accepted and greatly appreciated views of God is that of the Good Shepherd. While the best known reference to this description is found in the 23rd Psalm (“The Lord is my shepherd), the motif also makes appearances throughout the rest of Scripture. We find allusions to it in Luke 19:10 (“The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost”), and out and out direct ties to it in John 10:11 (“I am the good shepherd”), and Revelation 7:17 (“for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd”). This theme was then picked up by artists who depicted Jesus carrying the shepherd’s crook or rescuing the lost lamb, and musicians who put lyrics like “Shepherd of love, You knew I had lost my way” and “Savior, like a shepherd lead us” to song.

The thing is, because this basic description of God as the good shepherd is part of the common vernacular, we tend to lose sight of what such a portrayal is telling us. This morning’s passage grants us another opportunity to dive into what the imagery is trying to tell us.

The book of Ezekiel was proclaimed at various points around the time that the Judeans were sent into exile (which occurred in 597 and 586 bce). His words were meant to do several things: first to condemn the leadership, the human shepherds whom, as we hear it in the scriptures, even though God had chosen them, they had become consumed with their own wealth, influence, and power.

The next thing that was done was to call the people back into a pure relationship with God by worshipping in the temple as had been ordained. They were reminded to follow God and God alone.

This then leads us into what we are about to hear as God claims the role that the human leaders have walked away from. God becomes the shepherd. God becomes the influence that gets into the trenches, does the dirty work that needs to be done, and searches out those who have gone astray so that they might be placed on the correct path once again.

What I would like you to think about is this: if this is the style of leadership that God is displaying for us, this get out there and be fully committed to the cause that is being fought for, what does that mean for us and how we lead the church and ultimately others, as God’s representatives, in the here and now? The scripture reads this way.

Ezekiel 34:11-16

¹¹ For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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 watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴ I 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. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ 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, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

“Be a Leader: Follow the Shepherd!”

There are many politicians who do a wonderful job of sounding like they have a real knowledge of what is going on in the lives of their constituents.

There are very few who actually do.

This reality is by no means a recent phenomenon. It’s been going on for a real long time. One of the more famous quotes comes to us from Queen of France who told her rioting country, “let them eat cake.” Unfortunately, they couldn’t even afford bread.

King George III of England said, “Nothing of importance happened today.” He made that statement on July 4th, 1776.

The statement, “They are stupid, dirty, do not work hard enough and are content with their little cinema shows” was said by Benito Mussolini...regarding the Italian citizenry.

Bringing it into a more modern context, the statement, “Outside of the killings, [our city] has one of the lowest crime rates in the country” was said by Mayor Marion Barry about his city of Washington DC when they were the murder capital of the country, while ‘we have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it’ will forever be connected to Nancy Pelosi.

Thankfully, however, we know that disconnected politicians do not just exist on one side of the aisle as President Trump is credited with saying in regard to serving as President (and mind you, I had more than a few to choose from), “This is thousands of times bigger, the United States, than the biggest company in the world.” Yup, that’s reassuring.

In any case, politicians being disconnected from the reality of their constituents has been in existence since people have been living with one another.

While at first glance we may not view this passage from Ezekiel in this light of disconnect, that is exactly what has happened.

The leaders of the people of Judah (the southern kingdom) had gone far afield with how they treated the people. They had taxed them heavily, fought wars that were for personal glory rather than actual need, led people away from worship of the God whom their ancestors had made promises with, and created a system of division rather than unity.

Basically, they were worried about themselves, rather than the interests of the people. They were more concerned with attaining the trappings that leadership can dangle before you, rather than leading as they were called by God to do.

This passage is God’s response to that disconnect. What we pick up very quickly, is that leadership, or at least the sort of leadership that God is looking to see exhibited, is not about being powerful (as so often we associate leaders as being). But instead about getting after it, getting dirty and working for the people who are your responsibility. This is why the illustration of the shepherd fits so well.

The shepherd is by no means what we traditionally think of as a leader. The reason that this is the case is because the shepherd is actually a servant, an employee of the person who owns the flock. The shepherd did not own the flock. They merely earned a wage that may have been as basic as room and board during the times that the shepherd was not out in the fields. While out in the fields the shepherd had to put up with only having simple foods, harsh weather, and primitive lodging while possibly being away for long periods of time. Occasionally, the shepherd had to fend off wild animals (like lions, bears, and wolves), who saw the flock of sheep as their opportunity to eat, or thieves who saw the flock as their opportunity to make some money. All the shepherd had in order to accomplish these various goals were a heavy cloak to fend off the elements, a staff and a sling for direction and protection, and besides another shepherd, maybe a dog or two for company and sheep management skills.

It was hard work. It was dirty work.

But to make it sound like the work that was done was not vitally important would be an egregious misstep. Sheep were an integral part of the society which meant each animal was viewed as precious. Not only were sheep one of the major sacrificial animals used during Jewish religious rituals, but they also provided meat, milk, fat, wool, skins, and horns. If one animal was lost, killed, or stolen that meant a big hit to the bottom line.

So, if you were a shepherd, you had to be a good one, or you would become unemployed very quickly.

This is the sort of leader that God is. God is willing to do the dirty work in order that His flock, His people, might be cared for, might be guided safely from one day to the next. This is also the leadership style that God is looking for earthly leaders to take on.

This latter fact is clearly articulated just a few verses earlier in Ezekiel as it is written how the leaders of Israel, the earthly shepherds, have not only neglected their responsibilities, but have abused those under their care. God says through Ezekiel, "Ah, you shepherds of Israel ...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; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals."

In contrast to this, we hear that God will do what is supposed to be done by all those who are given the mantle of leadership. We hear God say that, "I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered" and, "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".

Not only is God telling us that we are going to be cared for when we are weak, healed when we are injured, and sought out when we are lost, but that these are also the attributes that we are to display. The reason that we are called to show these characteristics is because each of us are now called to lead. Being called as disciples of the risen Christ means that we have the responsibility to show the love, display the care, live out the light that was first show to us. We have been called to be leaders. In order to do it correctly and not fall into the traps that bad leadership holds, in order to really lead, we must always follow: follow our shepherd.

This past Monday, you know, a few days prior to Thanksgiving, my daughter Amanda asked Jen if I was running in the Turkey Trot. She let her know that I was, and then said that she would run it as well.

Now all of that sounds wonderfully benign, until you hear that Amanda hadn't run since the last time she had the Turkey Trot...two years earlier. When Mandy and I finally chatted about how we wanted to 'do this', she said, 'we'll start out together and then you can just go.' To that I said, 'no: we're running together.' Once we made that call, I knew that I would be the one who was helping to set the pace so that we ran the course as efficiently as possible, which caused me to immediately draw upon the lessons that I learned when I started jogging with Wendy Beisner some six years ago: pacing, slowing down in order to keep going, and ultimately push a little harder in order to do the best that we could.

At the end of the day, we completed the Trot in under 38 minutes, which is not a great time, but considering that it had been two years since she had run, it was a phenomenal time!

So there's Mandy following me while I'm following the lessons that I had learned. Sound like anything else that we have heard from this pulpit? We are called to lead, and do so by following the Shepherd.

Collectively, we have been burned by our leaders so many times that we carry with us an expectation that all of our leaders are going to lie (or at least bend (or ignore) the truth) to fit their personal needs. Too many leaders have abused their power (or at least tried to abuse their power). This is so much so the case that the concept of a leader who we can trust in every circumstance is an idea that feels like a dream, rather than a reality.

What our passage details for us this morning is that in God, the dream is not so far fetched. In fact the dream has entered into reality. God is the good and faithful servant who not only leads us to the promised land, but then, through the power of the Holy Spirit empowers us to go and do likewise.

This can be a tall order. Not only have we been burned by leaders, but we have become apprehensive about leading ourselves.

However, when God knocks on your door and calls you to serve, respond. If God has led us to this point of leadership, shouldn't we follow the shepherd who has brought us here? I hope that your answer is yes, that you will follow, and then respond when you have been led to.

Leading can be a scary thing. It doesn't need to be when we know that we are following the guidance of our divine shepherd.

After Sermon Prayer

O most holy and glorious God, You have most certainly led us throughout our lives. You have welcomed us as Your own. You have taken on the demanding responsibility of becoming our shepherd. God, we thank You for Your guidance and care. However, we also know that You have called us to become ambassadors of the light that You have displayed to each of us. God, grant us the strength to become such leaders, leaders who are able to care for others, as we are first cared for, and guide as we have been guided. Let us become leaders who are always following our shepherd. In Jesus' name. Amen.