

Ezekiel 34:1-16 (vs. 11)

Introduction:

Ezekiel is one of the most interesting books of the bible. Whenever we read one of the books of the prophets, we can expect it to be blunt and rough. And we can also expect it to be full of imagery. God tends to use his prophets as images as messages to his people. And when we read Ezekiel we almost can't help but be miffed at some of the things that the Lord asks of him.

For example, did you know that God commands Ezekiel to lie down on his left side for 390 days. That's over a year! Then he is to lie on his right side for 40 days. That's over a month. And God ties him with ropes so that he can't turn. And while he spends his days lying on his side, God commands him to cook his food using human feces as fuel. Now Ezekiel doesn't like that very much and so he asks for mercy and God says, "Very well. I will let you bake your bread over cow manure instead."

I would say that that is one of the most bizarre stories in the bible. We see that and we think "we don't think the way you do, Lord." This bold imagery continues all the way through the book of Ezekiel. The imagery that God uses in our text this morning is one that is familiar to us. We are very familiar with God revealing Himself to us as our shepherd. There is a rich biblical tradition of seeing God as the shepherd and it's saturated throughout the bible. Arguably, the most beloved scripture with this picture is Psalm 23, where I'm sure most of us have found great comfort in the first verse, "The Lord is my shepherd."

When God calls Ezekiel to prophesy against these shepherds, he is referring to the leaders of Israel. The kings. And we can see why in our text in verse 2: The shepherds care only for themselves. Remember this is imagery. Of course it's ok for a real-life shepherd to care for himself more than a real-life sheep. But these are human

beings ruling over other human beings. And we also see in verse 2 that it should be obvious to these kings that they take care of the people. It's a no-brainer. This is a bizarre story and it should make no sense to us. Why are these kings, who have been appointed to care for the people, not care whatsoever for the people?

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So Ezekiel is God's mouthpiece to speak out against all these leaders. We can sum of their offenses pretty easily. They are guilty of sins of commission. Meaning that they are actively participating in oppression. And they are guilty of sins of omission. Meaning they are passively participating in oppression.

Sins of commission tend to be the most obvious. According to verse 3, the kings eat the curds. This refers to some sort of solid milk product like cheese. In this context, eating it from the people refers to an exploitative act. They also clothe themselves with wool. Wool is from sheep. In this context, we can understand that they literally take the clothes off of the people leaving them naked and exposed. And they slaughter the choice animals. In our context, we can understand this as the kings committing judicial murder. Slaughtering the people without cause. These are sins of commission because they are obvious: people notice when their friends get executed, when they are naked, and when food is stolen.

Sins of omission are less obvious, but they are still sin. The sin of not doing something that you are supposed to do. According to our text in verse 4, the people were weak, sick, injured, lost and had run away. The leaders are doing nothing about it, but they ruled them harshly and brutally.

Nothing is hidden from God. God sees everything. No injustice escapes his notice. Every decision that these leaders made in their own interest and at the expense of God's people, God was

watching. Each time the leaders did something to God's people - like taking their food, God saw it. Each time the leaders didn't do something for His people, like seeing someone who was sick leaving them there, God saw it.

I'm actually surprised when I read verse 2 of that God through Ezekiel still uses the term "shepherd" for them. Because they are not shepherds. The people would have been better off not even having a shepherd. The leaders are doing the opposite of what we would expect a shepherd would do.

But the leaders themselves were technically doing great. They were taking great care...of themselves. They had nice clothes and good food. But God's people were in really bad shape. They were scattered. They were hurt. They were being taken advantage of. They were sick. They were sheep without a shepherd. And there was no one who was seeking after them. That's the conclusion of the accusation. God's people are lost. They are wandering. It's awful being lost, but it's maybe even more terrible knowing that no one is even looking for you.

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I heard a story once of a dad who lost his young son at an amusement park. When the dad found him, he was with a security guard. The security guard had found the little boy and asked him if he was lost. The boy said yes. The security guard was a little surprised how calm he was and he asked him if he was scared. The young boy replied, "nah...I have a big family. They'll find me." He had confidence he'd be found and so he didn't worry at all.

I remember worrying though as a younger ish girl whether or not I'd be found. I grew up in BC and when I was 12 our family moved to South Dakota. While we were moving we drove through Alberta and we hit a bad snowstorm. So we ended up staying an extra day in Brooks, Alberta, staying with some friends of my parents. My older sister and brother and I wanted to explore a bit, so we got some directions to a nearby mall which we walked to. Then as we were walking back I slipped on some ice and hurt my ankle a bit, so I couldn't walk as fast. My older siblings didn't care and kept walking at their regular speed and I couldn't keep up. I still remember the terror I felt when I turned a corner and didn't see them. Because I knew they wouldn't care if I got lost. They probably wouldn't even notice. I didn't even remember what the house looked like. So I just continued limping aimlessly down some streets hoping to see our family van on the street. When all of a sudden I saw a familiar figure walking toward me. It was my dad! He noticed I didn't come home. He knew I wouldn't know how to get back. He got on his coat and boots and came searching for me. I hugged him. And I should have known he would look for me. He's a great dad.

It seems like this passage is geared toward the shepherds. To tell them that they have failed and God is angry with them. But the purpose of this passage is for the flock. For the sheep. For all of God's people. For our comfort. It is for us to know that God seeks after his people. He is a great dad. Psalm 100 says, "We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. It is he who made us and we are his." We belong to Him.

Notice verse 6 in our text. God refers to his people as "my sheep." And in verse 8 he says that they are "My flock." He doesn't say that about the shepherds.

After Ezekiel calls the leaders of Israel out, he speaks for the Lord and the Lord, through Ezekiel says personally and intimately to his people, "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them." "I

will rescue them. I will bring them and gather them where they belong. I will pasture them. I will tend to them. I will search for the lost. I will bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured. I will be the shepherd."

The kings were forced to take responsibility for their actions and their political careers were ended. Every single thing that the leaders of Israel were doing wrong was being matched by God. Whatever the leaders did wrong, God was going to do right. It's like God is saying here, "Don't worry my beloved children. I will do it. I am taking over."

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God takes over and He is the Good Shepherd for His people. We tend to think about Shepherds as spiritual leaders. And as many of you know, the word for pastor in English comes from the word shepherd. Pastors, in other words, are like modern day shepherds. It's not an exact parallel though. In this context, Ezekiel is talking to the Kings as the Shepherds. The Kings that God had appointed the nation of Israel were charged with spiritual care AND political care.

We can see this in the history of the monarchy. Whatever way the king turned, the nation followed. When David was king, Israel was turned toward the Lord. It was a high point in the history of Israel where people looked back to and desired to have a time like that again – like when David was king. Then we have a king like Ahab. When he was King, the nation was full of idols and they did what

was evil in the sight of the Lord. Rather than say, like father like son, we can say, like king like nation.

And perhaps we could say now, like pastor like church. Pastors nowadays don't have the political power of kings, but pastors and elders have been appointed by God to be spiritual leaders in the local church. And they are charged by God to care for His people. This is a no-brainer to us. Pastors and elders take care of their congregation and not exploit them.

Pastors and elders use the word of God as their mouthpiece. They use the bible as the source of everything they do and teach. They are called by God to lead, so it makes sense that they would be constantly immersed in scripture. Spiritual leaders are called to care for the people according to God.

Because spiritual leaders don't have the same political power as they used it and because how churches are set up, the care looks a little different. The deacons typically meet the physical needs of the people. Pastors and elders are called to care for the spiritual needs. Sins of commission by pastors are also less common. Perhaps because they have less power because of how churches are set up. At least in our North American context, a pastor would not last long in his church if he went to someone in the congregation and robbed them of their clothes. And in our own Christian Reformed Church context, a pastor definitely wouldn't last long if he went to someone's house and went to their fridge and stole all their cheese.

But sins of omission are much more common among pastors and elders. I was talking to my dad about this and he said something very wise. He pointed out verse 4, where it accuses the kings of ruling harshly and brutally. My dad said that this has a whole other meaning in our culture today and it deeply affects those in spiritual leadership.

One of the jobs of a pastor or an elder is to point out the sins of the people. It is a loving thing to do. When Jesus walked the earth he sought after his sheep. But he also was not afraid to call people out on their sin – he constantly talked to Pharisees and Sadducees. He talked to the woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery. He called out to Zacchaeus and invited himself over. And He loved them so much that he was not willing to let them destroy themselves in their sin.

Nowadays, if a pastor calls people out on their sin, they can be accused of being harsh and brutal. It's now considered a loving act to smooth over the sins of our congregation and our friends. So many pastors and elders and all of us in the congregation are guilty of letting sin go. We can be guilty of the sin of omission. Making sin seem like not a big deal at all. After all, we, like the Kings, like to take care of ourselves. We like to be liked. And if we confront someone, we might lose a friend.

This takes wisdom. I have a friend who is a single mother. Her daughter is a teenager now. She has lamented to me in the past about how church members always seem to call her out on her sin so many years ago. She wishes that all sin would be taken seriously in the church, not just the obvious sins. The sins of commission. But also the sins of omission. Like not honoring the Sabbath. Or not helping the poor. Not fasting. Or not having compassion for people, like my friend.

Nothing is hidden from God. God sees everything. Every decision that we make for our own comfort at the expense of another, God is watching. And it is at the expense of the other. Because if we do not take sin seriously, we let each other get lost. We are prone to

wander. Prone to scatter. It's awful being lost, but maybe it's even more terrible knowing that no one is even willing to go looking for you.

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When the people who heard through Ezekiel in our passage that God was taking over and was seeking after them, it was Good News. And when the people heard that Jesus was proclaiming that the Kingdom has come, it was Good News. And this gospel is still Good News for us today: That Christ reigns and is still seeking after us.

John 10:11 records Jesus saying, "I am the Good Shepherd. And a Good Shepherd lays down his life for His sheep." And lay down His life he did.

God says something like this to us in his word, "because you have sinned against me, you must die. For you fell short of my glory and the wages of sin is death." And we say something like this back to Him "We can't do that Lord! That's too terrible of a punishment. We can't take it. Please Lord. We beg you. Have mercy on us. " And Jesus comes up to us and he says something like, ""Don't worry my beloved children. I will do it. I am taking over."

Jesus Christ. The God of all of creation left heaven to come down to die and absorb the wrath of God upon sin for us, his beloved creatures. This is the most bizarre story in the bible. This is the story that should have us miffed. This is the story where we should say, "God, we don't think the way that you think." But we are so glad that He does. Because we are so prone to think that we are actually not all that bad and that God is actually not all that great. That maybe we think of ourselves as pretty good and God just needs to save us a little bit. Because we actually are that bad and we are nowhere near the greatness of God.

And this is Good News. To know God's grace we have to know our sin. And when we know our own depravity, we develop the humility we need to accept criticism from our Shepherds – from God Himself and from our spiritual leaders and from our church family. We can look at ourselves and not see the sin, but see Christ's forgiveness. The Holy Spirit empowers us with the strength to love discipline on our journey to become more and more like Christ.

It is also much easier for us to forgive others when we know our own offenses and what we have been forgiven for. And the church is meant to be a safe place. A place where we know that we are sinners. A place where we know we trust we will be forgiven. We glorify God's grace by allowing ourselves to be corrected and by forgiving each other, thus outwardly showing our transformation.

If God did not seek after us to transform us, we would stay lost. And it is only by his immense, wonderful, lavishing, undeserved grace that he pursued us in the wilderness at his own expense to bring us back into the pasture where he will tend to us. When he draws us back from sin, he rules us with grace and patience, not harshness and brutality. God is a King of such magnitude and grandeur. He is a Good Shepherd, but a wild and untamable one. And he's a great dad.

God uses all of us to participate in his mission and seek after the lost. My dad is part of this ministry in Sioux Falls called Collision. It's a ministry in which groups are formed in schools to learn about our Lord Jesus. My dad is involved with some guys and he meets with them at a restaurant regularly and gives them a bible lesson. My dad, and the others in this program, are searching for the sheep in these schools and looking after them. They look after them by teaching them God's word and how to live according to it.

The Cadet theme, "Living for Jesus" fits this scripture perfectly. We live our lives knowing that Jesus is Lord. That's the good news. The Kingdom has come, and we live in the now and not yet. Christ is Lord of our lives now and we anxiously await for when God's kingdom is fully realized. Until then, we can now already humble ourselves to live for Him and join him to seek His people. All his people that he knows by name.

Amen.

