

Ezekiel 34:1-6, 11-16  
The Good Shepherd to a Weary Flock  
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12-13-15

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Throughout this Advent Season, we have been reflecting upon a single line of lyric from the beloved Christmas Carol *O, Holy Night*. It's a lyric that goes like this: *The thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices*. Nowhere else in the Bible does this tension between weariness and hope come through more clearly than in the writings of the prophets.

The first Sunday we looked at Jeremiah's choice to invest in the promise that Yahweh would restore his people. From his prison cell, Jeremiah actually buys a plot of real estate in the ravaged and decimated Judean countryside. His choice to lean into hope was an act of defiant faith, a protest to the persecution his countrymen faced. Hope gives you the courage and strength to believe the future is going to get better, because God is with us.

Last week, we asked the question: "From where does genuine comfort come, in our world today?" When the prophet Isaiah speaks, he ends nearly two hundred years of silence from Yahweh with these words: "Comfort" – take strength – Israel. Weariness is not something that is foreign to us. We all get weary sometimes, hopefully not during the sermon. What is the comfort that comes to which the weary world can finally stand up and rejoice? It's Jesus.

At Christmas, Jesus comes into the world and he comes into our lives. And the image that the Bible writers use time and again, both in the Old and the New Testament, is the image of a shepherd. This was familiar to the people. Being an agrarian society, there would have been a shepherd and his flock on every hill and every field—for us, not so much.

This morning, I'm going to spend some time with you looking at the hope that our weary world has, and that you can have: that Jesus is a good shepherd who cares for his sheep. The image of a shepherd who cares for his sheep does not originate in the New Testament.

This week, we're turning to the prophet Ezekiel. If you're looking for things that fall under the heading of weird stuff in the Bible, look no further than Ezekiel. Ezekiel is an interesting dude. There is one time that Ezekiel made a big pot of stew and then proceeded to let it boil and simmer until the whole thing was a burnt mess. Most famously, Ezekiel has a vision of a vast landscape of dry and decaying bones—then for some strange reason, God says, "Ezekiel, meet your congregation, preach to them." Then, sure enough, the death and decay begin to reverse and Ezekiel begins to see organs reform, sinews reattach, skin reemerge.

Ezekiel is so out there, he opens with a vision so strange that some in the last century concluded that what he actually witnessed was a UFO. On his trading card, Ezekiel's the one wearing the tinfoil hat.

But this morning, the image Ezekiel works with is one of a shepherd, entrusted to care for his sheep. And what was going on in Ezekiel's time, and what is true of today, is that the people

around Ezekiel needed help. We know what it means to need help. They needed help for a number of reasons:

1. The Shepherd was bad and the sheep were scattered.
2. The sheep were too dumb to know what they needed.
3. The sheep have been harmed, betrayed, abused, neglected.
4. The sheep went after the wrong things and got themselves into a dangerous situation.

So God comes to Ezekiel and gives him some things to say to the people. From this morning's reading, Ezekiel says things like:

- You've fed yourselves and not your sheep.
- You've clothed yourselves with the finest wool, while slaughtering the sheep for more.
- You've not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bound up the injured, or brought back the stray.
- You've scattered the sheep with no one to seek them out.

God gives Ezekiel a word of judgment for the wicked shepherds of Israel. Now remember, we're in the world of metaphor, but what is clear from this passage is that God is using this image to teach something to Israel. God was speaking to Israel about its Kings and Priests. *You take advantage of the people, attend to your own needs first, you take from the vulnerable and weak what your desires dictate, and you don't care for the needs of those around you.* This was the criticism God spoke through Ezekiel to the leaders of the day. Clearly you can see similarities in our day, in the ways that leaders capitalize on the backs of the people they're called to lead.

You and I, we are like the sheep in this passage. We are meant to be cared for, we are meant to have our physical needs met, not just with physical food, but intellectual. We have brains that were meant to be challenged and nourished with ideas and knowledge. We have emotional hungers, none of us is meant to live in isolation, we're meant to know and feel love and deep connection with others. We have spiritual hungers; do you know what it is like to hunger spiritually?

Do you know what one of the most vivid examples of spiritual hunger that I've seen in the last few months is? The way in which people around the world have rallied to the aid of refugee families from Syria, fleeing and looking for safety, and to see places like Germany, France, Canada welcome them in and provide them with safety. I have seen such a response on the internet as well, people calling out to their leaders to shepherd these lost and dislocated flock. It really has been wonderful to see.

The final need that the people had, that the shepherd wasn't tending to, was that they were lost, with no one to find them. This is one that is so present around us, to be a person who hits rock bottom, or just doesn't know where to turn, and when that person has someone to talk to, someone to share their struggle... We need someone to come and find us when we're lost.

And do you know what kind of people have these kind of needs, who need help and who need someone to care for them? Do you know what kind of person needs this? Every person.

And why does every person need this kind of help? Let's let the metaphor answer it for us: because we're sheep. And do you know what sheep do? Sheep get their head stuck in buckets, so they need help. Look at those legs, they can't get the bucket off their head with those stick little legs. Also that sheep is totally cut off from the other sheep; they can't have a relationship with the other sheep with a bucket on their head; the other sheep stand at a distance and look at the poor and unfortunate sheep that has a bucket on his head. The sheep also can't see the shepherd and can't see where it's going. It can't get the food it needs or water to drink, with the sheep being disconnected as it is. This sheep is lost and it needs help.

And I know this isn't very flattering and I'm going to have to ask your forgiveness for being so blunt, but you and I are like these four legged beasts wandering around through life with buckets on our heads. And we can't take the bucket off on our own and we need someone to come and help us by kindly and gently yanking the buckets off our heads. I bet none of you are going to look at the 5-gallon pail in your garage the same way now.

The message of Christmas is that God comes down into our pasture and removes these terrible buckets.

Let's return to Ezekiel. So far he's told us that God looks at the shepherds in Israel and says they're failing at their job. But that's not where the passage ends. Picking up in verse 11, we get one of the most stirring and beautiful passages in the Old Testament where God tells us who he is. God takes Ezekiel and he whispers in his ear, "You say this to the people."

**"For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And 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 ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. 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, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.**

What a tender and beautiful thing for God to be. Not only tender but strong and mighty and loving. This is what God says he is going to be for Israel:

He will make them lie down in secure rest. Do you have secure rest in your life, or are you running around so much that you feel quite disoriented? God promises secure rest for his people. This is how it works in the sheep metaphor. Sheep can't sleep unless they're well fed and have good water; they can't rest if they're not at peace with one another; they can't rest unless they're sure that they are safe and that the shepherd is right there caring for them and defending them.

He promises to strengthen the weak. Do you know what a sheep's chief source weakness is? Its very small brain. Sheep are dumb. When the shepherd is leading his sheep to new grazing lands, sheep begin to wear ruts in the ground. Now eventually all the grass there is gone, but the ruts are still there, and so the sheep continue to go back again and again by the old ruts to the place where they once found food—even though there's none there. Even though the shepherd is trying to lead them in a new direction, their impulse is to follow old ruts, even to places where there is no food.

I'll stop talking about sheep now and turn back to us. We do this, too. We get caught in ruts, in going to places where we know there is nothing good for us, but we go because we're comfortable, or worse addicted. We need a shepherd to lead us to good pastures with fresh water. If you have ever experienced this as a challenge in your life, your own weakness in resisting the thing that is bad for you, it doesn't mean that you're bad, it doesn't mean that you're weak, it means that you're human. And God makes a promise to us, he will strengthen us and, better, he'll protect us.

There's two more, let's look at them quickly. Look back with me at verse 16: God says, I will bind up the injured. The God of the Bible is not one who says, "If you've got issues, you get them straightened out before you come to me." No, God says to all of us, because we've all been wounded in one way or another—maybe you are nursing a deep wound right now, maybe there is a thought in your mind about yourself that is causing great harm you.

[Story]

The last promise that God makes is that he will be the shepherd who seeks after and leaves the flock to find the lost sheep. I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with people over these few years in ministry, people who are so clearly lost and don't even know it. And how badly I wanted to be the one that saved them, but that is God. And what lost sheep do without the shepherd is they give up and die. There are people all around us who have simply given up and are dying inside and out, because they have not heard the voice of the Good Shepherd, they have not heard God tell them "you are special, you are valuable, you are my beloved."

And what the prophet Ezekiel says today is that God himself will be the one who goes out and brings them back, one by one.

These words were spoken so many years before Jesus. Then in the little town of Bethlehem, into that stable surrounded by sheep and cows, a light shined. And here's the one who meets every fear the sheep have, and overcomes them. Here's the one who's ready to give them everything they need: to feed them, to sustain them, to help them, heal them, to find them, to restore them. In him, this weary world can indeed rejoice because he comes down to care for you and to care for me and to care for the world.

And now you listen to these words that Jesus spoke, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." Jesus knew that passage from Ezekiel, he knew those old hopes, he knew that every person in the world is like a sheep who needs a shepherd, he knew that this world is hopeless without him, he knew that the promise was that one day God would

send the help the people needed, and he proclaimed that I am God, and I am the Good Shepherd, and I am here to help. And that's who comes to us at Christmas.

Amen and Hallelujah!