

Scripture Readings for Sunday 22 April 2018

Ezek 34:11-16, 23-24

¹¹ “For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

¹² As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. ¹⁴ I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶ I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

²³ I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

John 10:11-18

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Sermon: “I am the Good Shepherd”

The great King David was a shepherd in his youth and this experience is thought to have inspired his beloved 23rd Psalm, which begins, “The Lord is *my* shepherd.” Tradition has it that Jesus followed in the family business as a carpenter before beginning his ministry. Nevertheless, the image of Jesus being the “good shepherd” is one of the most comforting and reassuring metaphors for Christ in John’s Gospel. It has inspired many works of art, including stained-glass windows - such as this one here in St. Andrew’s. Today, the fourth Sunday after Easter, is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday,”

and consequently our gospel reading is from John 10 where Jesus twice says: “I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.”¹ When we think of this well-known passage, our minds immediately make a connection with Psalm 23 because of its familiarity. I suggest, however, that John’s audience would immediately go to a *different* Old Testament passage. And consequently I want to explore that text briefly before coming back to our gospel reading today.

Ezekiel was a strange and mysterious prophet. He lived in Babylon and is therefore referred to as “the prophet of the exile.” But let’s start even further back in Israel’s history. The emerging nation of Israel, having crossed the River Jordan and gradually conquering the land of Canaan, was ruled by judges. The last of those ruling judges was Samuel. But eventually the people wanted to have a King and be like all the other nations around them. Samuel warned that this was not a good idea and that they were rejecting God as their true King. But the people insisted and God graciously conceded to their request, and so Samuel anointed Saul. Things began well, but Saul became a disappointment. Then along came David and Solomon, the so-called Golden Age of Israel. But as time went on, the subsequent kings increasingly disobeyed God, compromised the covenant, and eventually the country was broken up into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was later taken over by the Assyrian Empire. And after that, the Babylonian Empire conquered the Assyrians and even the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Both of those conquests resulted in exile for the Jews. As they wrestled with their sense of abandonment by God, they realized that it was they themselves who had failed to keep their covenant with God. It is in this time of desperation and seeking hope that the prophet Ezekiel spoke.

In Ezekiel 34, he speaks an oracle that begins, “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves,”² which is a message directed at its leaders, in particular its former *kings*. The indictment that Ezekiel proclaims states that the selfish king’s have *not* strengthened the weak, or healed the sick, or bound up the injured. They have *not* searched for the lost or brought back the strays, instead, they have ruled harshly and brutally.³ It is what Ezekiel says next that is so *shocking*, and which was our Old Testament reading this morning. God is *not* going to begin again with another king; this is exile in a foreign country, after all! God is done with kings, but he is not done with his mission to rescue his people; he *will* keep *his* side of the covenant because God *is* a promise-keeper. But he is going to do something very different; listen again to what Ezekiel says:

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says: *I myself* will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock . . . so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered.”⁴

God repeats that he himself will be their shepherd and that he will search for the lost and bring back the strays; God goes on to say that he will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, and that he

¹ John 10:11, 14-15.

² Ezek 34:2.

³ Ezek 34: 4.

⁴ Ezek 34:11-12.

will shepherd the flock with justice.⁵ All the things that the kings should have done and didn't do, God will bring about himself. God, speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, then says, "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken."⁶ This princely servant David was widely understood as being the Messiah.

This is the Old Testament context to our gospel reading. Just as Ezekiel through the oracle damns the kings who led the people astray, resulting in exile, so John has a not-so-subtle critique of the Pharisees, to whom Jesus is speaking in John 10. Jesus then says, "I am the Good Shepherd."⁷ First, this is one of John's famous "I AM" statements that connect Jesus with the personal name God gave to Moses. This intimate bond between Jesus and God is a major theme in John and in verse 15 Jesus stresses that special relationship saying, "The Father knows me and I know the Father," and later in verse 30 he says, "I and the Father are one." This boldly points to Ezekiel 34:11, "Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep," and the word translated as "LORD" is that same personal Old Testament name for God. That ancient prophecy is being fulfilled, implies John, God is at work among us.⁸ Therefore expect the Messiah to search for the lost and bring back the strays, to bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, and to lead the flock with justice. And the gospel writers portray the ministry of Jesus to be just that.

Second, the Greek word (*kalos*) for "good" that John uses to qualify shepherd does *not* mean morally good – although Jesus was that – but means "model" or "exemplary."⁹ Sometimes in English literature a community would speak about "the good doctor." They are not only thinking about his efficiency or proficiency as a physician, but his sympathy, kindness, and graciousness. It is those extra qualities that are desirable, attractive, praiseworthy, and compelling. Jesus is, then, the *exemplary* shepherd. Furthermore, the contrast is between the model shepherd, who is prepared to die to protect his sheep, and the hireling who runs way at the first sign of trouble.

Third, these "I AM" statements do not simply reveal who Jesus is, but who he is *in relationship* to others. In this case, everyone who gathers around Jesus perceives their identity as members of his flock. The Church is therefore asked to reflect on exactly *who* it is we are following. Even the name "Christian" shows that the church cannot be separated from the identity of Christ. So what does it mean to live as Christ's sheep? How does this identity get manifest to the world? Both are good questions to explore.

Jesus goes on to say, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and

⁵ Ezek 34:15-16.

⁶ Ezek 34:23-34.

⁷ John 10:11.

⁸ See also John 4:34; 17:4.

⁹ See also Ps 78:70-72; Zech 11:16; 13:7 – 9; Jer 23:1-3.

there shall be *one flock and one shepherd.*"¹⁰ The Pharisees and others in the audience would have been puzzled by that statement, but John's readers' understood because many were now part of that extended flock. The original sheep were the people of Israel, and Jesus was calling them from amongst his Jewish contemporaries. But, as Israel's prophets and wise writers – like Ezekiel - had always hinted, the God of Israel was never interested only in Israel. The call to Israel was to be a blessing to the whole world, a call that was embodied in God's covenant with Abraham.¹¹ The other sheep would be those from every nation under heaven that God intends to save through Jesus. Consequently, Jesus the Messiah is the shepherd of the *whole* world – to *all* those who will listen to his voice.

First, this challenges all denominationalism, as there is only one flock, and one Shepherd. Whatever our differences, we need to work together and listen to *his* voice. We have far more that unites us than divides us. Second, I believe this can be understood in a wider way in that there are many in this world who are following the Good Shepherd, but don't necessarily realize it. The story of Cornelius in Acts 10 is a case in point. We too need to recognize that wherever the unpredictable wind of God's Spirit is at work, there will be people who are responding to the voice of the Shepherd - as evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit that we read about in Galatians 5.¹² Some may find that aspect challenging, and we can talk further about it, for others it will bring relief or reassurance. Jesus is the Good Shepherd and *he knows* who are his sheep. There are too many Christians who consider themselves the gatekeeper of heaven, confidently pronouncing who will be there and who won't be!

There is a well-known joke of a lineup of people trying to get into heaven through the Pearly Gates. St. Peter consults his list and time after time he shakes his head, "No." He later turns around and he recognizes a number of faces inside heaven that he could have sworn should not have been there. He goes up to St. Paul and asks, "How did that one get in here?" To which St. Paul replies, "Jesus keeps helping them over the wall!"

John tells us that Jesus had two things to say about this topic. A few verses earlier, in John 10:9, Jesus says, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." Jesus is the gatekeeper, not St. Peter, and not you or me! And in John 21:21-23, Jesus tells Peter, "Don't you worry about the destiny of others, your job is to *follow me.*" That is our job too, plain and simple, because Jesus *knows* who are his sheep. So the question we all need to address is simply this: "to whose voice are we listening and who are we following?"

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that sometimes we go astray, just like sheep. If we are not mindful, we too can wander off into danger and follow one of the many voices vying for our attention. Jesus promises that he will never let us go. His voice will bring us back because we belong to him. This is a strong word of reassurance as we struggle to be faithful in our choices each day. Jesus

¹⁰ John 10:14,16.

¹¹ Gen 12:2-3.

¹² Gal 5:22-23.

seeks out the lost, those in need of being rescued, and they are often the forgotten ones in our society. In that process, this model shepherd was prepared to risk everything for the well-being of his flock. In this Easter season we remember that he was even prepared to “lay down his life for the sheep.”¹³ Moreover, John tells us that Jesus was confident that in giving his life he would receive it back again.¹⁴ This confidence was based on the intimacy of the relationship he has with the Father that I mentioned earlier. Not only does this point the inseparability of death and resurrection in John, but stresses that Jesus was not a victim or a martyr against his will, but he was in control of his own death. This is a theme that we find in John, and in Jesus laying down his life for the sheep, he freely chooses that path to be the ultimate expression in his obedience to God. This perceived understanding of Jesus’ own relationship with the Father and a seemingly perverse willingness to die both seem crazy to us. It was nuts to his audience too; John tells us, “Many of them said, ‘He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?’”¹⁵ And so we too have a choice, will we also think Christ was mad? Or will we listen and follow?

Comforting though this metaphor of one Shepherd and one flock may be, many today bristle at the idea of being thought of as a dumb or mindless sheep. We aspire to be leaders, not followers! But being a sheep does not mean being passive! That would be pushing the analogy too far. In fact, since Good Shepherd Sunday is celebrated in the season of Easter, it is worth reminding ourselves of Peter’s post-resurrection commission in John 21. There Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” This is usually seen as reversing Simon Peter’s denying of Jesus three times on the night of his trial.¹⁶ Jesus personally commissions Peter with these words, “Feed my lambs; take care of my sheep.”¹⁷ Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gives him a job to do – echoing the words he said at an earlier post-resurrection appearance: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”¹⁸ That commission, empowered by the Spirit, is to partner with God the Father and the risen Son in fulfilling that earlier prophecy from Ezekiel, when God says: “I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. . . I will shepherd the flock with justice.”¹⁹

The Good Shepherd also says to us today: “Feed my lambs; take care of my sheep.” Whose voice are we listening for, and whose example are we following? Are we searching for the lost and bringing back the strays into community? Are we binding up the injured and strengthening the weak? And are we pursuing justice?

Let us pray.

¹³ John 10:11,15.

¹⁴ John 10:17-18.

¹⁵ John 10:20. In v21 we read: But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

¹⁶ See John 18:15-18,25-17.

¹⁷ See John 21:15-17

¹⁸ John 20:21.

¹⁹ Ezek 34:16.