

Pastor's Message – 11/26/23
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 Ephesians 1:15-23

Two girls gather grapes. One is happy because she has found grapes. The other is unhappy because the grapes have seeds. Two women examine a bush. One is unhappy because it has thorns. The other notices the roses and is overjoyed with their fragrance. We see what we train ourselves to see in this life. Our outlook is important and depends solely on us.

Do you remember the list Robinson Crusoe made after being washed up on the shores of a tropical island? "Cast on a desolate isle, but not drowned as the rest. Banished from mankind and civilization, but not starving. No clothes, but in a hot place where they are not needed. Without defense against harm, but no wild animals." Life has both negative and positive aspects. We sometimes dwell more on the negative. We need to remember that the words *think* and *thank* come from the same root. If we stop and think we may find ourselves becoming more thankful. "It is good to give thanks to the Lord," says Psalm 92:1. Instead of complaining because you don't get what you want, give thanks that you don't get what you deserve.

Thanksgiving celebrations and gatherings have continued all throughout the last week and even into today. But what happens tomorrow? Does thanksgiving continue? Do we continue to have a spirit of gratitude? We have blessings we can see and blessings beyond our sight, but on the weeks before and after our national thanksgiving celebrations there can be a temptation to look only at ourselves, to look only at our resources, to look at the problems, to look at the needs and to become discouraged; to see only the evil around us and to despair.

Like the sheep of whom the LORD speaks in the Bible reading from Ezekiel, most of us have wandered off at some point in our lives. We may have found ourselves scattered amid the clouds and thick darkness, as Ezekiel says; we may have been hungry, wounded, and weakened. Every one of us has a story to tell.

Think for a moment about your story. There may have been a time when you literally did not have enough to eat or wondered whether there would be enough tomorrow to pay the bills that kept piling up. Or you may have struggled with the clouds and thick darkness of depression, barely able to get out of bed in the morning. Or you may have been laid off, out of the blue, when you were not expecting it. Or you may have found yourself in a spiritual wilderness, wondering whether God existed or whether your prayers just hit the ceiling and fell back again, if you could even summon the energy or faith to offer them.

God wants not only to gather us in, but also to help us recover from our wounded-ness. "I promise to take care of them," the LORD says, "and keep them safe, to look for those that are lost and bring back the ones that wander off, to bandage those that are hurt and protect the ones that are weak (Ezekiel 34:15-16)."

It's a dream we all have. The dream that someone will come and rescue us from whatever things in our lives give us pain and grief; the dream that someone will bind up our wounds and bring us to a place where the world is bright and clean and there is no more pain. A place where we can be with all the people we love. A place where our hearts are at ease. A place of peace. Perhaps it is a place of cool, running water. A place where the sun always shines. Where flowers bloom and children play and deer walk in the cool shade of the trees, lovely wraiths in the early morning. It is a dream that we have recited in Psalm 23 for centuries. "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want."

Ezekiel has a word for all of us today.

Ezekiel has a word of hope for any and all in exile. In a sense, many of us are in exile from the America we thought we lived in. While physically still at home, we experience a sense of exile -- from how we believed life would turn out, or from long-held ideals of equality, or from reward for hard work, or from the hope of each generation doing better than the last. Others are in exile within our culture, foreclosed out of their homes or laid off from their jobs or saddled with debt from inadequate health insurance.

Where we all are sheep, Ezekiel reminds us that all of us have a role to play in watching out for our fellow sheep. No matter how desperate, how frightened, how anxious we are, we are not to trample our fellow sheep. All of us belong to the flock of the Good Shepherd and are meant to care for each other. All of us are the heirs of the God who promises not just food, but justice too.

We observe today, a rather unfamiliar focus on Jesus as King. The day was initiated in 1925 by Pope Pius XI as a response to the rise of secular political movements and civil governments that were trying to either co-opt the name of Jesus for political purposes or failing that, to convince people that Jesus was simply irrelevant. In his encyclical *Quas Primas* (*in the first* in Latin), Pius established it as a day to remember, celebrate, and recommit ourselves to a relationship with Jesus Christ that is metaphorically akin to the relationship of subjects to their king.

We observe today how the world's usual expectations of kingship are turned upside down. Rather than staying put and expecting the loyal subjects to come to the king's castle, this God and King goes looking for them (Ezekiel). Rather than achieving his position through acts of violence or self-aggrandizement, Jesus is enthroned as the crucified one, not by his own ambition and achievement, but by God's power (Ephesians). Rather than looking for signs of worldly success to determine the degree of God's blessing, Jesus looks for whether we have blest those left unblest by the rest of the world (Matthew 25:31-46). Contrary to our Bible readings today, we can sometimes reduce the size and magnitude of the power of God that we have seen made visible in the resurrection of Jesus Christ to the limits of our minds and our understanding.

The true King, the King God wants us to see, the King that Jesus was and is, is like Israel's second king started out to be: a shepherd.

And not just any shepherd.

This is a shepherd whose flock has been scattered by the actions of typical kings and rulers and leaders, religious and otherwise. This shepherd is one who goes looking for the scattered sheep, wherever they've been abandoned or wandered astray, cares for their wounds, and, when it's time, carries them back to a safe fold where they can find healing.

Here's the part we may not like as well but must pay attention to.

This shepherd takes sides.

This is also the shepherd who will choose to ignore or even destroy the sheep who have prospered at the expense of those who have been injured and scattered, those who have pushed or shoved the others out of the way to get all the choicest pasture for themselves, those who made themselves strong on the backs of those who were weaker and whom they made weaker still. This shepherd has no interest in their preservation. They are like a cancer, taking and consuming resources for themselves and their own purposes that were intended to be made available for the good of the whole body. If they will survive at all, it will be without the help of this shepherd.

This shepherd sides with the weak, the outcast, the damaged, the diseased, the abandoned, and the marginalized.

This shepherd spends time with *them*, caring for *them*.

And not with or for the benefit of the privileged ones.

This is the Shepherd of the saints. This is Christ the King, and this is the way his kingdom works in the world. And these weak, outcast, damaged, diseased, abandoned, marginalized people-- these are the saints Christ the King, Shepherd of the Saints, tends.

Ever seen a "Beware of Sheep" sign posted on a gate? No? Yet, today, it's not only religious shepherds who are going rogue; it's sometimes the sheep as well.

Paul's words to the Ephesians challenge us. I want to be an Ephesian of whose faith Paul has heard of. I want this church to be an Ephesus whose love for others Paul has heard of and for whom Paul gives thanks and prays for. Paul challenges us as to how our responses to Jesus as our king differ from the "usual" expectations of

kingship. The citizens of a realm are expected to “look like” their king, just as the disciples are expected to look like and live like their master. As we do, we become inheritors of God’s kingdom ourselves.

So, who looks like this king where you are? What’s happening in the life of this Congregation that looks like a shepherd going after scattered sheep, healing them, and bringing them home? Where do you see not simply Jesus, but his crucified body being exalted? And beyond the liberal/conservative and grace/works divides, where do you see the least being cared for as such a matter of course that folks even seem to forget they’ve done it?

If we are his, we acknowledge who we are and what we’ve done. We’re weak, not self-sufficient. We’re outcasts in one way or another, little as we may want to admit it to ourselves. We’re damaged, and in our damage we’ve probably damaged others. We’re diseased, riddled with sin, some of which we caught from others, some of which we carry to others. We are abandoned-- even abandoned by Christ the King if we try to live out of whatever privilege we’ve been allowed to have or have taken for ourselves. We are marginalized, because in the end there is no center in this world that holds or where anyone can truly stay for long.

If you don’t want to be found by the Shepherd who keeps seeking out the people you think are all of these “negative” things, and you’re convinced you’re not like them and want nothing to do with them, just keep that up. Be strong. Be self-sufficient. Take what you believe is yours. Enjoy your privilege and ignore the cries of those your privilege robs or fails to feed. Consider this shepherd your adversary. Because he is.

Or let him find you. Let him tend your wounds. Let him love you with the love of the Eternal. Let him unmask you for how weak and vulnerable you really are, how much you need others, especially those you’ve been content to ignore or cast aside. Let him lead you to take up your place among them.

Then let him put new clothes on you. Let him and your sisters and brothers he has rescued reshape your story. Let him turn your self-reliance into humility and your boasting into thanksgiving.

But we’re not done yet. I’m reminded of the man who once walked by a Little League field and saw a boy in the outfield. There was a lull in the game, so the man asked the boy how it was going. “Aw,” the boy said, “We’re losing 22-0.”

“Wow,” the man said. “It’s been a rough game for you. Are you bummed about it?”

The boy turned and looked at the man and shook his head. “Nah,” he said. “We haven’t been up to bat yet.”

That’s hope. When things are looking bleak, know that what Paul prayed for the Christians in Ephesians applies to us. We may be down, but God’s team still gets to bat.

That is why Paul prays in his Letter to the Ephesians for the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that our minds and hearts might be expanded by the knowledge of God’s power, rather than letting us continue with such feeble concepts of God’s power. The people of God who constantly renew themselves with a new appreciation and constant reminders of the vastness and greatness of God’s power go forward in faith and service knowing that they are the channel through which God has elected to use that power. The church is not a weakling. The church is not a wimp. The church is only powerless when it focuses solely on its own current resources. Christ is the head of the church, the church is the body of Christ, and it is through the body of Christ, through the church, that the power of Christ will be fulfilled and expressed into history.

That is why our greatest sin as the people of God against the Holy Spirit is to think negatively or to think realistically, to say that we can’t do that now, to think that evil cannot be overcome, to say that nothing can be done about that sickness, to close the doors on options for the future simply because we do not see how we can achieve that. God may not heal our sickness. God may not give us at this moment the resources to give good--paying jobs to everybody. God may know that what we need most is the struggle and not the success, but to say that it is not a possibility, to say that child abuse cannot be stopped, to throw up our hands and to say that we cannot reestablish discipline in our schools, to say that there is nothing we can do to help our young people come to a joyful and affirming understanding of sexuality within commitment, to say we cannot feed, with all the resources and food on

this earth, all those in Africa and around the world who are hungry, who wring their hands and say that mass shootings and war between peoples is inevitable, is to deny the power and the potential of the love of God.

Paul prays for the church that it might have a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that it might grow in its knowledge and appreciation of the providence, the personality, the power of God's love, so that we in the church may always be full of more joy and possibility than those who suddenly realize they hold the winning Powerball numbers, for we understand fully that we are the conduit into the world of that same amazing power that resurrected Jesus Christ from the grave, that took that rejected and despised Jesus and made him Lord over all creation and set him as Head of the Church, and who will send that power to his body so that he might continue to fulfill his mission and calling to redeem history.

Paul is praying for the whole body of Christ. Somehow it still seems to me that we have lost something of the greatness of the vision of a redeemed creation and history when all we worry about is the salvation of individual souls. As if all we have to say is that God will just have to deal with individual problems because God is not able to deal with powers, principalities, and kingdoms of this world. Paul says that a prayer for a new spirit of wisdom and revelation of the power of God will send us forth as the body of Christ. What a power! What a God!

I want to have that spirit of wisdom. I want this church to know and to exhibit and live out and proclaim the awesome power of God!

We are called to be rogue sheep – to stand against the hopelessness and despair of the world and proclaim the hope and promise of the God who stands against the “me-first” attitude of the world. God raised up Jesus from the dead that we who believe might be rogue sheep.

Are we Ephesus? Are we stronger spiritually than we were a year ago? Have we accepted gratefully the spiritual nourishment Jesus offers us? Are we more open to God's love and more able to share that love with others?

Are we stronger emotionally than we were a year ago or five years ago? Can we see some healing from the wounds we have received in our lives? Some wounds do take years to heal, but let's look to see how we have gotten better under the care of the Good Shepherd.

And what about our church community, are we more deeply grounded in scripture? Are we showing more love toward one another? Are we engaging in greater ministry in our community?

God has infinite patience with us and allows us to take steps toward growth in our own time, at our own choice. God understands the depths of our struggles, but is always there ready to offer the nourishment, to apply the healing ointment--whatever we need to continue our journey.

We can give thanks to Jesus, the good shepherd, for his loving care of us. He seeks us out in all the dark shadows of our lives and calls us in our weakness and need. Then he helps us to continue to grow, to become faithful and bold followers of him, now and into eternity.

I wish there were a “Beware of sheep” sign on the church door. Sheep who have a strong and committed belief in Jesus as king proclaim that the world as we know it is not the world that God promises and not the world that can be as we follow and live out the identity of a church which reflects the new order: the kingdom of Jesus here and now. May this church be a new Ephesus, and may it be filled with rogue sheep who trust in the power of Jesus the King to overcome all the evils of the world.