

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Scriptures: Ezekiel 34:11-16, John 10:11-16

Last Wednesday at the Preview with the Preacher class after reading this scripture passage from Ezekiel 34, we talked about times in our lives when we felt God had been like a shepherd to us. It was a great discussion. I shared about the time when I was looking for my first call to a church after seminary. I applied to something like 15 different churches, all of whom turned me down. So when I got a call to Potlatch, I was thrilled. I felt like God had made me lie down in green pastures. Actually there was a green pasture across road from our house.

Others in the class also shared stories. One described how God guided her at some critical decision points in her life, and I thought again of Psalm 23: “He leads me in paths or righteousness for his name’s sake.” Others mentioned how God had protected their children or grandchildren in dangerous situations, and I thought of these words from Psalm 23: “I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.” I bet many of you could think of times when God provided for you or protected you like a shepherd protecting and providing for the sheep.

But in Ezekiel God is a shepherd in another sense. According to Ezekiel, when God promises to be a shepherd to the people of Israel, God promises more than provision or protection. To show you what I mean, take a pew Bible and turn Ezekiel 34 (OT, p. 803).

Verse 11: “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.”

Verse 12: “As shepherds seek out 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.”

Verse 13: “I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries...”

Verse 16: “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed....”

God certainly intends to provide for the people of Israel—to feed them and protect them. But in this scripture passage the most important thing God does for Israel is to go looking for them, to seek them out when they are scattered or lost.

Interestingly, when Jesus talks about shepherds, this is the quality he most emphasizes. In the pew Bible turn to Luke 15 (NT, p. 78). At the beginning of Luke 15 the Pharisees are grumbling about the way Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them, so in verses 4-5 Jesus tells them a parable about a shepherd:

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

Jesus does not emphasize how the shepherd provides for the sheep or protects them. On that score you wonder about a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine other sheep in the wilderness

to go off looking for the one that is lost. That does not sound like good shepherding to me. I suppose we are to assume that other shepherds looked after the remaining ninety-nine while the one shepherd searched for the lost. But that is not mentioned. The story does not focus on how the shepherd protects the sheep or cares for them. It focuses on how he pursues them—how he goes after them to bring them back.

Jesus makes the same point about himself in our first scripture lesson. Now turn to John 10 (NT, p. 103). In verse 11 Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” He goes on to talk about how the shepherd protects the sheep from the wolf, even if it requires giving his life. Clearly, Jesus is looking ahead to his death on the cross and how it will save the sheep. But Jesus is not just concerned about the sheep he already has. Look at verse 16: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” There has been much speculation about who these other sheep are. But here is the point: Jesus is not satisfied with the disciples he already has. Jesus is not satisfied with the 99 sheep that are already in the fold. Jesus is not satisfied with the 400 or so people who are here at worship this morning. Jesus is the kind of shepherd who keeps searching, who keeps seeking, who goes out to find those who have strayed and bring them back. And that, I think, is the most hopeful news of all.

On several occasions during this sermon series on Ezekiel, I have talked about parents and children. Last week in Ezekiel we read a story about a good man who had a violent, corrupt son. It was heartbreaking to discover that the father’s goodness could not save the son. The father could teach his son about faith, but he could not make him believe it. The father could set an example of right living, but he could not make the son follow it. We parents are in a terrible quandary. We care deeply about our children, but after a certain point we are no longer able to control what they do or what happens to them. We can only watch helplessly from the sidelines.

But God does not watch helplessly from the sidelines. That is the good news. God is not the kind of shepherd that nurtures and cares for only the sheep safely in the fold. The Lord is a shepherd who is determined to go looking for the lost, to bring back the strayed, to find the sheep that are not in the fold, who do not have a faith and a hope and a community to sustain them. And that, friends, is what will finally save our children and us: not our good example but God’s persistent love.

One of the small groups in our church is reading the book *Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamont. It is an amazing story. At one point in her life Anne was alcoholic, bulimic, addicted to crack, and having simultaneous affairs with two married men. As a result of one of these affairs she became pregnant and had an abortion. It’s fair to say that her life was pretty messed up. But there was a shepherd who never quit looking for her. She writes,

On the seventh night [after the abortion], though, very drunk and just about to take a sleeping pill, I discovered that I was bleeding heavily. It did not stop for the next hour..., and I got very sober very quickly. [Finally] I got in bed, shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill. I had a cigarette and turned off the light. After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I assumed it was my father,

whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there--of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this. And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die." I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with. Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning he was gone.

This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left. And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or *something* was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me. I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head... took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in." So this was my beautiful moment of conversion (pp. 49-50).

If God can hunt down Anne Lamott and bring her back, God can do the same for your children, and the people you care about, and maybe even you.

- Ken Onstot
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