

**Sheepish**  
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
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**Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24**

<sup>11</sup>For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup>As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among 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. <sup>13</sup>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 watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. <sup>14</sup>I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup>I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. <sup>16</sup>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, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

<sup>20</sup>Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. <sup>21</sup>Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, <sup>22</sup>I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

<sup>23</sup>I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup>And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

**Matthew 25:31-46**

<sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup>And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ <sup>41</sup>Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

You may have noticed on the cover of your bulletin that today is Christ the King Sunday. I will admit I needed to do a little research as to its history and significance. So I quote, “Christ the King

Sunday is celebrated on the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, before the beginning of Advent, which starts the new Church Year. As the last Sunday of the Church Year, Christ the King Sunday is the climax and conclusion of the Church's liturgical journey through the life of Christ and the Gospel message. Its purpose is to celebrate the coming reign of Christ as King of the Earth and his completion of the renewed creation that marks the fullness of the Kingdom of God. That hope is born from the entire life of Christ and his teachings that have been celebrated in the seasons of the Church Year during the past twelve months. In celebrating the Reign of Christ the King, this Sunday also provides an appropriate bridge to the new Church Year that begins the following Sunday on the first Sunday of Advent with an emphasis on hope and expectation, the longing for the coming of the Kingdom of God amid the darkness of a sinful world."<sup>1</sup>

We don't often talk about Christ or God as king, beyond the reference to "thy kingdom come" in the Lord's Prayer so this image, this role may feel foreign or even uncomfortable. For the Israelites in exile and the early church who were the first hearers of the readings from this morning, kings were more commonplace, a more recent and active part of history. In fact, the Israelites themselves had had kings to help guide them. After trying to be led by judges, and counterproductively fighting their authority, they thought perhaps they might be more obedient to kings and that the kings would always act with their best interests in mind, caring for them and protecting them. A good king was known for the care and protection of his people, holding these responsibilities in highest rank. That is an image from this morning's reading we can relate to God.

The image of shepherd, though, for those of us who have never done herding, has become both simplified and exaggerated. So, again, I did some research. The Internet is truly an amazing thing. A search for *Sheep Herder's Diary* turned up this, a somewhat humorous, always biting accounting of life on a Nevada range from a former Badger, Clel Georgetta. He said,

For three years now I have forfeited my heritage to a place in civilization and have spent most of my time on the range learning why sheep herders go insane. Today that peculiar smell [of sheep] is a bit sickening to me and the bleat of a sheep grates upon my ears and disgusts me, especially, if it is loud and often repeated, because that means the old ewe has lost her lamb.

He continues,

Just another ordinary lambing day. Hour after hour I rode from one bunch to another, catching a sheep here and there - driving this bunch this way and that bunch that way - Will I ever forget the bleat of a sheep? Over and over again it happens that a tired and disgusted man - a fellow who knows what the world looks like at 3:00 AM - a fellow who is dirty, unshaven, itchy, sore-footed

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.criovoice.org/christtheking.html>

and leg-weary - such a man comes upon the scene as a wise man coming to call upon Mary, the Mother of Christ. But this is so different! He comes not with gifts but with swear words. The old ewe puts her head high - spans the earth a whack or two with her front foot, like an angry woman, and then starts up country. The little lamb, a few hours old, fills his lungs and says, "Maaa." The old ewe stops short and turns around with a "Bababa" and then runs back to the lamb - that senseless thing that nine times out of ten tries to follow the man or the horse he is leading or even the dog - anything but its mother. Finally, Mother and lamb are together and then the whole act begins again.<sup>2</sup>

And in an article found online, a Navajo shepherdder recalls "when nearly everyone tended sheep." He says, "It was common to see five generations of an extended family, their lives revolving around their herd. It was a 24-hour operation that included making sure there was enough to feed the animals every day, overseeing lambing, shearing, vaccinating and the eventual sale of the animals."<sup>3</sup>

Over and over, in the middle of the night, in the middle of the day, at dinner time, the sheep do their own thing, oblivious, thankless, even senseless. And yet, the sheep herder tends to them, cares for them, watches for them, over and over. In this same article about the Navajo shepherdder, he shed some light on the trouble of goats. He says, in guessing why some sheep have wandered off, "Maybe the goats are to blame. They get minds of their own and lead the sheep everywhere."<sup>4</sup> Back in the time of the gospel, and well before then, "shepherds routinely had mixed flocks...Because sheep had more commercial value, they were preferred over goats."<sup>5</sup>

We like to think of Christ as King for the care and protection he offers us, his people. We like to think of Christ as Shepherd for he tends to us, cares for us, and watches over us, over and over, even when we are oblivious, thankless, and, yes, even senseless. But Christ the King also sends away the goats in the reading in Matthew and Christ the Shepherd consumes the fat sheep in Ezekiel. How can these lessons be about the Christ who gives us comfort? In whatever ways we may behave like sheep, we want to be the sheep that King David shepherds and the sheep on the right hand of the king, the Son of Man. We want to be the lean sheep and not the fat sheep, the sheep and not the goats. What comfort is there in these readings should we fear even the teeniest bit that we might have pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted the weak animals or steered them astray as goats with minds of their own can do?

As I mentioned, the first hearers of the words of Ezekiel were Israelites in exile. The Israelites had made it into the Promised Land, yes, and they had thrown it all away by not listening to judges and by

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.knowledgecenter.unr.edu/sheepfiles/shepherdersdiary.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.azcentral.com/news/native-americans/?content=shepherdder>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 333.

following kings who made alliances that split them up and sent them into exile, straight out of the Promised Land. Now, Ezekiel, a prophet, comes to them in exile so that they might not forget their mistakes and repeat them. His words are like the prodding staff of a shepherd, nudging them back into the right paths and the right ways. Matthew, it is believed, was sending a message to all those who were persecuting the followers of Christ. He, too, with his way of shaping the Word of Christ was prodding them to better behavior and to a right way of thinking.

These words for us today are not to make us fearful and hopeless. These words are the Word, just as Christ was the Word, and the Word, as person and print, is a shepherd prodding us along the way as needed. These words for us today are words of encouragement and reminder so that we don't get too far along the path to becoming bullying sheep and misleading goats. Next week is the beginning of a new year in the church and a new year's resolution is not an uncommon practice. Any who have ever gone down the wrong path know, the farther down the path you go, the longer it takes to get back. A great way to begin is with the Advent devotional calendar included in this month's newsletter; the calendar starts next Sunday, the first day of our new year, with a brief, manageable reading for each day about the one who comes to us as King, as Shepherd, as Savior. So, in this new year, I encourage you to make a resolution to let the Word be a constant companion nudging you back daily, while it's easier to turn back, while it only takes a gentle shove instead of a hard whack.

Let us pray: God of grace, we give thanks for your care, your protection, and your Word which nudges us when we stray. Amen.