

“Prickles and the Rest of Us”
May 3, 2020

Ezekiel 34:1-15, 23-24
John 10:2-4, 14-16

In urban churches surrounded by concrete, in rural churches neighbored by fields, stained glass windows show Jesus, shepherd's staff in hand, leading sheep through green pastures. On the walls of church school classrooms we see pictures of a smiling Jesus, carrying a lamb on his shoulders.

“I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says.

When life is confusing and we don't know which way to turn, when life hurts and we are filled with grief, when we face the mystery of death, the words start to form on our lips even without thinking: “The Lord is my shepherd.”

In the past thirty years or so, this fourth Sunday of Easter has been observed in many places as “Good Shepherd Sunday”—a day to hear scripture lessons like those from Ezekiel and John, to consider the care and comfort the shepherd provides the sheep.

While we can all use some comfort in these days, the problem is that most of us know little of sheep or shepherds.

But we got some help recently with the story of Prickles the sheep.

Did you hear about Prickles?

In 2013 there was a series of bushfires on the Australian island state of Tasmania. The fire destroyed much of Alice Gray's family farm, including miles of fencing on its border. In the ensuing chaos several of the animals on the farm fled—including Prickles, who at the time was just a lamb.

She was gone for seven years. Apparently, she wandered too far away and ended up on the other side of the rebuilt fence.

Now, Prickles was just one of thousands of sheep and her absence first went unnoticed. But many years later a night vision camera installed to check for deer on the property showed what one person called: “a great white, fluffy thing.”

Recently, the Gray family was looking for a change of scenery for some relief during their self-isolation because of the pandemic. They decided on a cookout on their property's back paddock to celebrate their son's sixth birthday. During the party they saw this sheep with seven years growth of wool.

Family members chased the sheep and after fifteen minutes they cornered Prickles.

It took several of them to get the sheep into an SUV, given that for lack of shearing Prickles was about five times the size of a typical sheep.¹

Prickles has been called a “social distancing icon.” She’s the mascot of the pandemic who obviously knew about thriving while social distancing.

What’s the biblical text from Handel’s *Messiah*?—“All we like sheep have gone astray.”

All we like Prickles are finding out how to live cut off from the rest of the herd.

And while the stereotype is that sheep are a little, well, dumb, all we like Prickles are learning how to cope, how to survive, and ultimately how to get on in a new and challenging landscape.

All we like Prickles are also starting to look a little unkempt.

Maybe we know more about sheep than we thought.

And maybe we’re learning something about shepherds as well. In spite of Prickles’ resourcefulness that kept her alive in the wilderness for seven years, she couldn’t get back home on her own. Ultimately, she needed the shepherds who sought her and caught her and brought her home.

The story of Prickles might help us to better understand the interest that Jesus, the prophet Ezekiel, and the Psalmist had in shepherds. They were interested in shepherds because they were concerned about the sheep.

This is to say, they were concerned about *leaders* because they were concerned about *the people*.

They understood that the well-being of the people was directly connected to the functioning of the leaders.

In response to the destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile of its residents in Babylon, Ezekiel has two questions as he writes abouts shepherds and sheep:

How did we get into this disaster?

How do we move forward from this place?

Those ancient questions sound a lot like the questions many are asking today. I’ve been asking them. You might have been asking yourself such questions in recent weeks.

How did we get into this disaster?

How do we move forward from this place?

Ezekiel’s answer?

Leadership—or the lack of leadership –brought the downfall of the nation.

The shepherds—that is, the kings, the rulers, the leaders—the shepherds did not care for the sheep. Ezekiel imagines God’s word of judgment: “You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.”

The leaders indulged their own appetites, they enriched themselves at the expense of the people. The weak, the sick, and the injured were left to their own meager resources. The leaders showed little regard for the people, treating them harshly and with brute force. And so, like sheep, the people have been scattered, left to wander on their own in the wilderness.

Leadership matters. Good government matters.

The importance of good leadership that is concerned with the people becomes especially apparent in times of crisis. And when it is missing, we, the people suffer.

I don’t have the time this morning to recount the failures of leadership on the national level that we have experienced in recent months. As the novel coronavirus was spreading in other countries valuable time was lost in the United States because leaders would not recognize the threat that was coming toward this nation. The warnings of national intelligence were ignored. The threat was downplayed and wishful thinking substituted for planning. Quack cures were pushed. People became ill, people died, the economy crashed, lives have been turned upside down and people have been left devastated.

In our own state, the governor has opened up three-quarters of the counties, ignoring the pleas in a twelve-page report from researchers at the UI College of Public Health that warned “a second wave of infections is likely” if mitigation efforts are loosened.

In response, the Governor said last Monday: “We must learn to live with COVID virus activity without letting it govern our lives.”² Just how we are supposed to learn this, she did not say. Leadership is lacking.

The governor also told religious organizations across the state that they could resume in person worship services—a decision that caught mainline churches off guard. In response an ecumenical group that included the United Church of Christ, issued a statement encouraging “congregations and members across the state to take faithful action by refraining from in-person religious gatherings, including worship....Decisions to return to in-person gatherings,” the statement said, “should be based on science, the best practices recommended by public health officials, and in consultation with the leaders of our faith communities.”

This is providing leadership when leadership is lacking. Our Church Council showed the same kind of wise and caring leadership last Tuesday when it affirmed keeping the church building closed until at least the end of May. Yes, we miss each other. But in these days we show our love for one another and for our community by remaining apart.

After decrying the lack of leadership, Ezekiel then asks how his society might move through the disaster to a new life.

At first, the prophet turns our attention to God, who—apparently out of a sense that “if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself”—decides to be the good shepherd, the good

leader who rejects the self-indulgence of the inept shepherds and who is concerned with the well-being of the people.

But quickly God announces a new shepherd, who, like the great shepherd-king, David, will feed the flock and care for them. God's rule is entrusted to a human leader. Through a leader who will set aside self-indulgence, the public good will be restored and remade.

Now, the early church looked at this new leader and saw the image of Jesus, the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep that they might have life and have it abundantly. And we begin to see that those who follow this Shepherd are called to show similar care for the life and well-being of others.

A decade ago the Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, said that Ezekiel's message "invites a focus on leadership, for we in our society are in an acute leadership crisis. When we take in turn Ezekiel's judgment on failed kings and Ezekiel's vision for a new shepherd-king, we may bring the text close to our own society in crisis. There is no doubt that our society is now governed by an oligarchy of the wealthy who not only control all the branches of government but who have established an alliance between corporate power and government oversight to the great benefit of the wealthy and the powerful. Thus tax law, regulatory agencies, and judicial decisions are all administered by the 'fat and strong' to their own benefit and to the neglect of the 'hungry sheep' who are without resources."³

What was true then is even more so today.

Self-indulgent, self-aggrandizing leadership that ignored the needs of most people, that turned away from bad news, indulging in wishful thinking, brought us to this point.

Let us listen carefully, then, to those ancient words that give us a new vision of leadership for these new times: a shepherd who will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak, and feed the hungry.

As citizens of a democratic society we are called to seek and work and pray for such leaders at all levels of government. It is up to us, not to God, to fulfill the vision of the prophet, creating and re-creating our institutions and our leadership in ways that will provide life abundant for all, not just for the few.

Ezekiel shows us what might be. It is up to us to bring this vision of new and right leadership to reality even in these challenging times, so that on the other side of this pandemic—whenever we get there—all might share in the goodness of this land and the abundance of life.

¹ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/prickles-sheep-finally-returns-home-after-fleeing-2013-bushfires-tasmania-180974729/>

² <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/health/2020/04/28/university-iowa-researchers-warn-kim-reynolds-administration-second-coronavirus-wave/3040849001/>

³ https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002fac/on_scripture_dr_walter_brueggemann_on_ezekiel_34__reign_of_christ_sunday