

“Shepherds, Leaders, and the Common Good”  
April 26, 2026

Ezekiel 34:1-6, 11-16  
John 10:7-14

Along with everyone else, I am grateful that there was only one person—a secret service agent—who was injured in the shooting last night. And he has been released from the hospital. Political differences are important and necessary, but political violence has no place in a healthy democracy. Yet it is on the rise in our nation. My sermon this morning does deal with the political and religious implications of other recent events, but it was written before last night.

As is usually the case, I doubt that little will change because of this shooting.

That said, it is good to be back. And I thank Craig and Libby for so ably filling the pulpit in my absence. My time away provided some welcomed rest and renewal.

And yet, I don't know. It's not like I'm really in charge of all of this, but I take a little time off and the religious life in our nation seemed to spin out of control:

At a Department of Defense sanctioned worship service, the Secretary of Defense offered what he said was a prayer based on the words of the prophet Ezekiel. They were actually the words of Samuel L. Jackson in *Pulp Fiction*.

Some are taking out after the Pope as if they were sixteenth century Protestants.

The Vice President, himself a Catholic, said the Pope needed to be careful when talking about religion.

The Speaker of the House said that the Pope needed to be educated in just war theory, ignoring the fact that the Pope is a learned Augustinian and St. Augustine was the one who *developed* just war theory.

And our President...well, first our President posted that bellicose and vulgar Easter message. Then there was that AI generated image of himself that, to me and many others, sure looked like he was being made out to look like Jesus. Even his conservative Christian supporters thought it was blasphemous. He said he thought the image was of him as a doctor—but he sure didn't look like anyone I've ever seen over at UIHC.

He's been in his own war with the Pope, saying “I don't want a Pope who criticizes the President of the United States because I'm doing exactly what I was elected, IN A LANDSLIDE, to do.”

He also strangely claimed that the Pope was “soft on crime.” I don't know why he chose that accusation, but “soft on crime” does sound like an attitude you might expect from a follower of the One who challenged: “Let those who are without sin throw the first stone,” and who spoke with compassion toward a thief being crucified next to him.

The President participated in a week-long effort to read through the entire Bible—that ended yesterday, so you missed it. He read, without the slightest sense of irony, a passage from II Chronicles calling the people to humble and themselves and turn from their wicked ways.

This past week he also said that he’s “all about the Gospel...as much as anybody can be”—whatever that means. Not everyone agrees: According to a new Pew Research Center survey, seven-in-ten Americans say the President is not too or not at all religious.

As I said: spinning out of control.

All of this seems to be related to and fueled by our war with Iran—a war that was supposed to be over by now but is dragging on with little sense of purpose or direction. I heard it described as a tactical success but a strategic disaster.

The war and this strange surge of strange religion are occurring in the context of growing corruption.

The American Bar Association said last month that the current “administration has exchanged government benefits, appointments, pardons, and policy decisions for financial contributions from wealthy individuals, corporations, and foreign governments, creating an unprecedented pay-to-play culture. These transactions—ranging from donor-driven federal appointments to dropped investigations, lucrative business deals, and foreign gifts—have enriched the President and his allies while undermining long-standing ethical norms and public trust in democratic institutions.”<sup>1</sup>

Religion, war, corruption. This ongoing dance is nothing new, of course.

We in the United States have our own particular history of religion and politics. We are religious people and we are political people. When we deal with the holy, the Bible and our own experience warn us that we are engaged in a very dangerous enterprise. We run the risk of enshrining in law our limited and flawed religious sensibilities. We run the risk of baptizing and anointing our limited and flawed political perspectives. We run the risk of baptizing and anointing our limited and flawed political leaders.

Which brings us to this morning’s scripture lessons.

This fourth Sunday of Easter is observed in many places as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” We mark this day some years, as we are today. This is a day to hear scripture lessons such as those from Ezekiel and John. Sometimes we sing and hear music based on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, with its familiar words of comfort: “The Lord is my shepherd.”

The image of God as a shepherd is ancient, yet it still speaks powerfully to our modern hearts, wandering and lost, looking for safety in an often dangerous world. Even in our technological age, we want to believe Jesus when he says, “I am the good shepherd.”

This morning, this shepherd image comes to us as something other than a source of bucolic comfort. It comes with judgment as it speaks to our tumultuous times.

Jesus, the prophet Ezekiel, and the Psalmist 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 as the leaders.

As followers of the God of the prophets, as followers of the One who called himself the good shepherd, we, too, should be concerned about leaders out of concern for the people.

In response to the destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile of its residents in Babylon, Ezekiel has two questions as he writes about 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 answers?

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 on the leaders: "You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep."

Rather than shepherds they were supposed to be, they are more like that thief, who, Jesus says, "Comes only to steal and kill and destroy." The powers of death and destruction were as real and active in the ancient world as they are now. They are shown in leaders who indulge their own appetites and enrich themselves at the expense of the people. The weak, the sick, and the injured are 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, Ezekiel says, the people have been scattered, left to wander on their own in the wilderness.

The word of God through the prophet? Leadership matters. Good government matters.

When things are going well, we often don't think about leadership that much. When democracy is functioning we give it little thought. The importance of good leadership that cares about the people and their well-being becomes readily apparent in times of crisis. And when it is missing, we, the people, suffer.

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."<sup>2</sup>

"We in our society are in an acute leadership crisis..."

"Our society is now governed by an oligarchy of the wealthy..."

Brueggemann, a liberal scholar and member of the United Church of Christ, wrote those words, not last week, but some 15 years ago, when a different political party was in power. There is in our nation an ongoing bipartisan consensus in favor of corruption and opposed to the lack of care for the poor and weak.

How did we get into this disaster? Ezekiel says it came about through a lack of good leadership.

Self-indulgent, self-aggrandizing leadership that ignores the well-being of most people, that turns away from bad news, and indulges in wishful thinking, brought us to this point.

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. Apparently out of a sense that "if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself," God decides to be the good shepherd. "I will rescue my sheep" from the corrupt shepherds. "I will search for my sheep and will seek them out." God rejects the self-indulgence of the shepherds in favor of 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.

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

Brueggemann encourages us and challenges us when he says: "As Israel need not have poor self-serving kings, so a democratic society need not suffer poor outcomes from an exploitative oligarchy."

The Good Shepherd calls us to be the ones who bring forth leadership that seeks the common good. In ways never imagined by the ancient prophets, as citizens of what is still a democracy, we can make a difference for the good in our nation by calling for leaders who care for the common good. We are called to seek and work and pray for such leaders at all levels of government.

How did we get into this disaster?

The lack of leadership.

How do we move forward from this place?

It is up to us.

It is up to us—not to God.

It is up to us in our time 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.

It is up to us to bring this vision of new and right leadership to reality even in these challenging times—especially in these challenging times—so that our democracy might endure and all might share in the goodness of this land and the abundance of life.

It is up to us.

---

<sup>1</sup> Saurav Ghosh, “The Trump Administration’s Rampant Pay-to-Play Corruption Threatens Our Democracy,” *Human Rights Magazine*, March 2026

<https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/resources/human-rights/2026-march/trump-administrations-rampant-pay-to-play-corruption-threatens-our-democracy/>

<sup>2</sup>[https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002fac/on\\_scripture\\_dr\\_walter\\_brueggemann\\_on\\_ezekiel\\_34\\_reign\\_of\\_christ\\_sunday](https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002fac/on_scripture_dr_walter_brueggemann_on_ezekiel_34_reign_of_christ_sunday)