

A KING THAT SEEKS

11-22-20

Psalms 100 1 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. 2 Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. 3 Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. 5 For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 11 For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 12 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. 13 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. 14 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. 15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. 16 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.

20 Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21 Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, 22 I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. 23 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. 24 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 31 "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. 32 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, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 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; 35 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, 36 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.' 37 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? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and

welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 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.' 41 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; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 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.' 44 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?' 45 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.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

It is fitting that on this last Sunday of the church calendar year we celebrate Christ the King. To me this means that after the whole year's cycle of studying the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the beginning of the early church, we confirm today that Jesus is indeed the king that God wants us to follow. Just think, we have come full circle in our search, as God's people, for a king. It used to be that God was considered king of the people and God appointed judges and prophets to keep us on track. But then in history, the people wanted to have an earthly king like the other nations around them even when God warned them of the problems that would bring. And after centuries of ups and downs with earthly kings, God brings about Jesus, Emmanuel (God with us) to be their king and ours.

There are two common words in all three readings this morning: 'sheep' and the implied second word is 'shepherd'. These are

important words within the concept of this Sunday being Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday. This last Sunday of the church calendar signifies the ongoing reign of Christ as Lord and King of our lives. In the Middle Eastern mind, the term 'shepherd' also meant religious leader as well as 'king'. This king served the Divine One in making sure the sheep or people were taken care of in terms of food, protection, supporting, teaching, binding the wounded and general care. While in our reading from Matthew, the king sits upon the throne at a time of judgment, the Shepherd in Ezekiel presents a more active part of shepherding. With both of these being the same person from God, they might seem to be in tension with each other on the surface, but Matthew's takes place at the end of time while Ezekiel takes place during our middle of our lives. But let's go beyond the surface and get to the place where God is speaking to us today concerning a king who seeks us.

Let me first start by saying the sheep are deeply loved by God. There must not be a question of that in our minds if we are to understand the role God in Jesus Christ plays. In Psalm 100, we are invited by the psalmist to praise God and God's goodness, in that God created us and claims us as God's sheep. Now the thought of

being a sheep might not appeal to everyone because sheep have been known to have a bad reputation of being dumb and easily misled into stupid group behavior. While this may be true at times, on the other side, sheep are able to hear and respond to the shepherd's voice when called. The voice and particular song of a shepherd is engrained into the sheep so that they are not easily fooled. However, what tends to happen with sheep is that they are a curious and sometimes lazy bunch. They wander off in directions that they think will bring them to food or happiness and that is when they stray away from the herd led by the shepherd and fall into ditches or get bogged down in muddy waters. When they get lost, they simply hide first out of fear of predators. They might not bleat until it becomes dark and are aware they might become victims. In contrast, those sheep who find they are in the presence of God are well fed and are called to join in a jubilant praise which is also very political. To praise God is to reject any other who would try to claim our allegiance including one's own country's flag or government.

The reading in Ezekiel 34 may make us think about our time in our recent pandemic or even today's struggle with the extremist of Hamas and Israel. In it, we were confronted with a people in exile.

Not only are they in exile by being taken in captivity from their country, but many are also considered to be in exile because of their abandonment of God. They had abandoned their relationship with God for other things. However, in this reading we hear about how God is very active in seeking them out, to bring them back into the relationship of healing life rather than leaving them in death's hands. Commentators agree that this not only speaks to the time of those exiles (of the past) but to all people of all times who find themselves taken captive by the world around them. It is both literal as well as prophetic. God was going to bring those people back into their own land and at the same time bring them back into the land of covenant relationship time after time after time. The objects of God's attention are those who are lost or captured in Ezekiel. Jesus echoes this very same thing. When questioned about why he spent so much time with whom people considered were obvious sinners such as the tax collectors, prostitutes and the lame, he said the healthy do not require a doctor but the ill do. He said he came to seek and save the lost. Jesus, as God's own, actively goes towards those whose lives have gone astray.

The point of the reading from Ezekiel, is that God, as Shepherd, actively goes after the people, after the sheep who get lost or trapped in the obstacles of culture. Some of the obstacles of our culture are: the lure of financial security; the desire to be famous and idolized; to desire to be free of the obligation or responsibility to help and protect those with less or not like us; the privatization and/or shame associated with our faith tradition's wealth accumulation; the illusion that tells us what choose to do does not affect others or does not matter how it affects others; the belief that unless you do certain things according to certain people's standards, you are not worth anything; and the fear that no one will notice you or miss you. These are the people who are lost. These are the people who need to be found, affirmed and demonstrated that they have worth. These are the ones that God wants and pursues to return them to themselves and to the relationship that gives them life. And the way that God pursues them is through us, the many disciples who claim to love God, who claim to have received the comfort and guidance that the Great Shepherd gives.

In our time during COVID, it was easy for us to remain behind in quarantine to save ourselves and let others fend for themselves.

And we distance ourselves from the troubles, the bloodshed over land and freedom between the Hamas and Israel which are far away even through our modern technology makes it immediately clear what is happening. But I believe we are called to find new ways of reaching others as the messengers of God's love and peace. The November 16th Interfaith Gathering of Solidarity and Hope (Christians, Jews, Muslims and other faith traditions) joined together to give support to both our local Jewish and Muslims neighbors while this war continues to consume and hurt all concerned. This reflects an answer to the questions posed in the very now famous passage from Matthew 25, often titled, "The judgment of the Nations". We are asked when we did the good things to Jesus in the poor, the despised, those imprisoned, those left on the margins. In this judgement we are being challenged to change how we act towards each other now. We are called to recognize the humanity in one another, now. We are called to be the new creation doing good things in a new way, now. The Presbyterian Church USA publishes a daily thought on how to be a Matthew 25 church. It does not look at this passage as the end of time but rather the challenge to be the church today we were meant to be right now: the church of sheep who cares for everyone regardless of

where they come from or what station in life they hold or how they have been seen by others. The Matthew 25 church takes seriously the call of God to be God's hands and love searching for a world of people who are lost. We are called to love the unlovable, to care for and heal those who have been thrown away and abandoned, to welcome those who have been pushed aside and done wrong. And we are not to cater to those who are rich and fat, but we are to call them into accountability to their God and to ours.

Jesus is that shepherd who seeks us and brings us the good news of God's kingdom and is both Shepherd and King. He instructs us how to live in this new kingdom and calls us all to share that love and direction with everyone, right now today.