

Ezekiel Sermon – October 20, 2024 - Hope for a Good Shepherd

A sermon based on Ezekiel 34, preached by Zac Klassen

Ezekiel saw the wheels;
Way in the middle of the air.
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These words to the classic African American spiritual, originating on the slave plantations of the American south, draw us into the call story of our prophet for today, Ezekiel. Right at the outset of this prophetic book, Ezekiel notes that it was while he was in Babylon “among the exiles by the river Chebar, [that] the heavens were opened, and [he] saw visions of God. One of the first visions he mentions includes that of a

a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. ⁵ In the middle of it was something like four living creatures. This was their appearance: they were of human form.

But these were no ordinary humans.

⁶ Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. ⁸ Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: ⁹ their wings touched one another; each of them moved straight ahead, without turning as they moved. ¹⁰ As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle; ¹¹ such were their faces. (chapter 1)

Yikes. What vision to start off the book. We see right at the outset that, for those who are daring enough to read them, the visions of Ezekiel are not for the faint of heart. They are often bizarre and sometimes disturbing, leading many biblical commentators to say of Ezekiel that he is the “strangest of all the prophets.”¹ As his vision continues, it is here that we encounter these famous “wheels”:

¹ Alter, *The Prophets*, 1049.

⁵ As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. ¹⁶ As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl [gemstone]; and the four had the same form, their construction being something like a wheel within a wheel. ¹⁷ When they moved, they moved in any of the four directions without veering as they moved. ¹⁸ Their rims were tall and awesome, for the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. ¹⁹ When the living creatures moved, the wheels moved beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose.

Can you imagine your friend telling you they had a vision of God and then describing their vision like this? You might rightly be perplexed – probably concerned for your friend. As Ezekiel continues, he describes a dome above the living creatures and the wheels and above the dome a throne – and seated on the throne the likeness of something that seemed like a human form – and there was splendor all around. Ezekiel says of this splendor:

Ezekiel 1:28 - 2:1 This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking.

The voice was God's, and it told Ezekiel that he was sending him "to [speak to] the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels...[a rebellious house] and [that he] shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD." Thus begins Ezekiel's ministry as a prophet while he was in exile in Babylon.

The backstory to Ezekiel's life is in Jerusalem, and more specifically, in the temple. Ezekiel was a priest who lived and ministered during the period of Israel's history when the southern kingdom of Judah was all that remained of its national body. The northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by his time and not only that, the nation that had destroyed the northern Kingdom, Assyria, had also been overtaken by the now national superpower, Babylon. Ezekiel was presumably fulfilling his duties as a priest in the temple until a fateful day when Babylon invaded Jerusalem, taking all Jerusalem's leaders and social and religious elites into exile. And it was in exile that Ezekiel, temple priest, became Ezekiel, the prophet.

Like most other prophets, Ezekiel's message was one of both judgment and hope – a message that something among his people was profoundly “not right” and that things would get better with God's help and the people's repentance. I said before that the visions and prophecies of Ezekiel are not for the faint of heart and I really meant it. As a prophet whose speeches and bizarre actions (like eating a scroll and lying on his side for three hundred and ninety days) are borne out of the traumatic events of forced exile, we should take to heart what Robert Alter calls “the dangerous dark side of prophecy.”² The dark side of prophecy is that the words of prophets, while they are presented as the word of the LORD, are nonetheless inevitably impacted by the “prophet's sensibility and psychology,” and so we should always take care in how we read and interpret them.³ While it is important to honor a voice like Ezekiel's, a voice that speak from a place of trauma, we should also recognize that acknowledging his voice need not mean validating every single word of his, especially when those words depict violent and offensive imagery.

Perhaps it is for the best, then, that today we are going to focus in on a prophetic word from Ezekiel that is relatively down to earth and relatable when compared with some of the other passages: the pastoral image of a flock of sheep and their shepherd on a fertile landscape. Of course, this image is a beloved one, often evoking for us a sense of God's provision and peace, as God leads us, in the words of Psalm 23, in green pastures and beside still waters. In Ezekiel 34, however, this sense of provision and peace is replaced by basically the opposite image – that of sheep in pastures that have been left unattended by a caring shepherd. For Ezekiel, while God is

² Alter, *The Prophets*, 1052. Alter notes, for example, that the way that Ezekiel invokes sexualized imagery of the female body when speaking of Jerusalem is disturbing. We must take good care to approach these types of texts in Ezekiel in the context of worship or Christian formation only with a great deal of caution as well as with an emphatic critique of the presence of misogyny in the Bible.

³ Alter, *The Prophets*, 1052.

the Good Shepherd, there are other shepherds whom God calls to also care for the sheep. The leaders of Israel, for him, are like shepherds who had been given responsibility to care for the flock – the people. But something's not right. Listen to Ezekiel's words:

Ezekiel 34:2-6 Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶ My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

Ezekiel is clear – Jerusalem's shepherds have failed in their task. When they should have fed the flock, protected the flock, and accompanied the flock, they have instead fed themselves *off* the flock and have abandoned the flock to predators. Here is it helpful to remember that Ezekiel writes in exile among his people's leaders and occasionally receives word of Babylon's ongoing assault against Jerusalem. For him, the undoing of Jerusalem's nation is in large measure a result of bad shepherds – of folks with privilege who were in a position to strengthen the weak, to heal the sick, to bind up the injured, to bring back the strayed, and to lead with gentleness, but who chose instead to exploit the disadvantaged for their own gain.

Ezekiel's prophetic word from the LORD against Israel's shepherds takes a dramatic turn when God speaks, saying:

Ezekiel 34:11-16 I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out...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...¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture...there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture...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...

For this traumatic history of the scattered flock to be resolved, Ezekiel prophesies, God will appear as the Good Shepherd, doing everything that his people's leaders could not do. Here, as Christians, we take great hope in this image – we take great hope because we have placed our trust and our faith in the one who came to us as God's very shepherding presence among us, Jesus. In Ezekiel's vision, God promises to come to rescue God's people and says that this will happen when God sets

23up 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...

Jesus, whom the New Testament calls the son of David, is for us that shepherd.

In John chapter 10, Jesus says "I am the good shepherd." And notably, contrary to Shepherds that seek to secure life for themselves, this good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I think it remarkable that Ezekiel's prophecy comes to such powerful fulfillment in Jesus' life and ministry, in his death on the cross, and in his resurrection that attests to the fact that the power of love will ultimately win out against violence and force. But what I find even more remarkable is the way that Jesus' fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy doesn't make the prophecy a thing of the past. Lest we think that the fulfillment of Ezekiel's word of God's coming as Shepherd ends with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we need to consider how after his resurrection, Jesus yet again invokes Ezekiel's prophecy to call his disciples to the task of gentle shepherding today.

Remember Peter's encounter with the risen Jesus on the lakeshore? What did Jesus ask Peter on that day three times? [*RESPONSE*] "Simon son of John, Do you love me?" And after Peter responded "Yes," what did Jesus tell him to do? [*RESPONSE*] "Feed my lambs, Feed my sheep." Reading a Prophet like Ezekiel from so long ago and hearing his prophetic judgments

against national and religious leaders that have been dead for millennia, can make it hard to understand how his words can be relevant for us today. But especially when read through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we can see how we are called today to catch the ongoing relevance of Ezekiel's prophecy for us too – for we all, in our own way, according to our own abilities, and in our own stage of life, are called, like Peter, to feed the sheep of God's pasture as we are able. We all face the temptation, just like Peter, to be like the bad shepherds of Ezekiel 34. But thanks be to God, with the Spirit's help we can imitate our Good Shepherd in doing what we can to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, and bring back the strayed. We are all called, most profoundly, to be like our gentle shepherd, no matter what status we hold in our society, in our community, or at our workplace. And so, I want to encourage us all to think very practically about Ezekiel's metaphor of shepherding. Can we commit to remember Ezekiel's prophetic word this week and pray something like this prayer, one or more times (and I can send this prayer out later), "God, you have sought me out. I am a sheep in your flock and long for your care and love. As I open myself to receive your care and your love, show me who I can care for and love today." Ezekiel's message, read through the Gospel of the Good Shepherd, really can lead us to this simple prayer and its call for us, if we let it. May it be so. AMEN