

“Kings and Shepherds and Sheep and Goats (Oh My!)”

A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church

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26 November 2023: Christ the King Sunday

Ezekiel 34:1-10

Matthew 25:31-46

Ezekiel 34

¹The word of the LORD came to me: ²Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴You 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. ⁵So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶My 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.

⁷Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸As I live, says the Lord GOD, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; ⁹therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰Thus says the Lord GOD, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the

sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.

Matthew 25

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. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then 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; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then 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? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And 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.’ ⁴¹Then 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; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I 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.’ ⁴⁴Then 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?’ ⁴⁵Then 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.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

I. Introduction

The last Sunday of the Christian year is commonly known as Christ the King Sunday. A 20th century addition to the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar, Christ the King Sunday was adopted by the communion of churches responsible for the Revised Common Lectionary, of which the Presbyterian Church (USA) is a member. The Roman Catholic church celebrates Christ the King Sunday in October, while the Revised Common Lectionary makes it the last Sunday of the Christian year, which is the Sunday before the start of the season of Advent, which we will celebrate next week with our traditional "Hanging of the Greens" service.

It’s a fitting placement because the Christian year as a whole finds its rhythm in the birth of the Christ child (season of Advent), followed by the life, death and resurrection of the Messiah (season of Easter), which in turn is our promise of the second coming of the Risen Messiah as the King of all Creation (Christ the King Sunday). That the Christian liturgical year starts with Advent and ends with Christ the King Sunday is a reflection of this theological arc.

But the image of the King of all Creation is not limited to the formal institution of a monarchy. One of the most prominent images for rulers in the Hebrew Bible is that of a shepherd (in Hebrew a Qal participle from the verbal root רעה), and hence one of the metaphors used for God in the Old Testament is that of a shepherd (see, e.g., RISBE 4:464; AYBD 5:1189; IVP [Dictionary of the Prophets 291-92](#)). We are most familiar with that image from passages like Psalm 23 which begins "The

Lord is my shepherd," but there are many other passages in the Old Testament that are based on that metaphor (e.g., Gen 49:24; Ps 28:9; 80:1 [= MT 80:2]; Isa 40:11; Jer 31:10; 43:12; Ezek 34:15). Our first reading this morning is one of the passages in which the metaphor of "shepherd," used both for the leaders of Israel and for God, is prominent and in fact occurs about 17 times (!) in this chapter alone. So let's take a look at our passage from Ezekiel 34 and see how that helps us understand what is going on in Matthew 25.

IIA. Pivot to Ezekiel

(**slide2**) Most scholars believe that the prophet Ezekiel was active during the early 6th century BC, and like the prophet Jeremiah, he seems to have been active before the Babylonian Exile began and during the Babylonian Exile itself (see, e.g., AYBD 2:711 ["The prophet Ezekiel lived during the Babylonian Exile and was active as a prophet from 593 B.C.E. to at least 571"]; RISBE 2:262 in table format [see end of sermon for the image]). Chronologically, there are thirteen (!) different passages in the book of Ezekiel that track his narrative from roughly 593 BCE (Ezek 1:2), through the time when Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonian armies (Ezek 24:1), and up to the vision of the restored temple (Ezek 40:1). Our passage then falls into the section where the people of the kingdom of Judah have either just been exiled to Babylon or are left with nothing - no temple, no king, no economy, no nothing - to make the best they can in their homeland of Judah. We cannot be more specific about the time frame for the prophecy, but it is likely that it happened within about the first 10 years of the exile, which is important because it means that the events leading to Judah's exile would still likely be fresh in the minds of Ezekiel's audience.

In that context, then, our passage this morning focuses on the leaders of Israel - the shepherds - and assesses their leadership of the people of Israel - the sheep. That judgment is starkly negative and the responsibility for the defeat of the kingdom of Judah at the hands of the

Babylonian empire is placed squarely at their feet. What is the content of this judgment?

Ezekiel tells us in the first part of our reading (**slide3**): "This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

Ah (אֵי; note the similar word אֵל) you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves!"

That word "Ah" is our first clue that something has gone terribly wrong because it isn't the semantically neutral word that we might hear in contemporary English. The word occurs about 51 times in the Old Testament (so DCH 2:503; the word אֵל occurs 24 times per DCH 1:150) and when it is used by the prophets it is almost always used as an exclamation that introduces an oracle of divine judgment, and in this case the NIV's translation is much better than the NRSV's. So Isaiah 1:4 reads per the NIV translation, "Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him." That doesn't sound like the introduction to a "Well done, good and faithful servant" prophecy to me! Something similar can be seen in Micah 2:1, which says per the NIV translation, "Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it." The same thing is happening in Ezekiel 34 that is happening in Isaiah 1 and Micah 2. God's got someone directly in his sight because they haven't done what they were supposed to do and thus divine judgment is about to be pronounced against them.

But why is divine judgment being pronounced here? That is expressed in the second part of verse 2 by the rhetorical question, ***Should not shepherds take care of the flock?*** Like any good rhetorical question, the answer expected by Ezekiel is obvious: Why, of course shepherds should take care of the flock. That's basically their whole job, isn't it?? And yet, verses 3-4 list all the ways that the shepherds have chosen ***not*** to take care of their flock: (**slide4**) "You eat

the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴You 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” (Ezekiel 34:3-4). Note that God’s indictment of the shepherds includes seven different ways that they shepherds failed to do their jobs: (1) not feeding the sheep, (2) not strengthening the weak, (3) not healing the sick, (4) not binding up the injured, (5) not bringing back the sheep who have strayed, (6) not seeking out the lost, and (7) ruling with force and harshness. What were they doing instead of caring for the flock? Ezekiel says they were taking care of their own selfish needs: clothing themselves, eating the fat, and slaughtering the fatlings. Given that "performance review," as it were, it shouldn't come as much of a shock that God isn't thrilled with what the shepherds of Judah were doing all these years.

(slide5) As a consequence of this bad behavior by the leaders, the Lord pronounces judgment on them in verses 9-10: “⁹therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰Thus says the Lord GOD, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep (וְהִשְׁבַּתִּים מִרְעוֹת צֹאן; the NRSV translation is poor because the shepherds haven't been feeding the sheep [see verse 3, "you do not feed the sheep"], so why would God "put a stop to their feeding the sheep" when they aren't feeding the sheep in the first place? Other translations like the NET ["I will no longer let them be shepherds"], the NIV ["I will remove them from tending the flock"]; and the NJPS ["I will dismiss them from tending the flock"] make much more sense in context); no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them." In other words, the failure of the leaders to do what they are supposed to do and what God expects them to do leads to God being against them; the sheep will be taken from them, no longer to serve as food for them, and the shepherds will no

longer feed themselves at their sheep's expense. (Verses 11-16, which we did not read this morning, provides the new future for the sheep: God will seek out His own sheep [verses 11 and 12] and God will be their shepherd [verse 15] and do all the things that a good shepherd is supposed to do. God will feed them and make them lie down in good grazing land; God will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak [verse 16]). In short, they will be stripped of their authority over the sheep, and God Himself will take their place as the shepherd of his flock.

IIB. Pivot to Matthew

(slide6) This pronouncement of judgment, then, provides the background for the parable that is our New Testament lesson this morning. Matthew 25:31-32 introduces the parable with the words, "³¹When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." The claim that Jesus will separate as does a shepherd the "sheep" from the "goats" echoes God's claim to be the good shepherd of the flock. (slide7) The criteria used by Jesus to separate the sheep from the goats are found in verses 35-36:

(1) I was hungry and you fed me; (2) I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; (3) I was a stranger and you welcomed me; (4) I was naked and you gave me clothing; (5) I was sick and you care of me; (6) I was in prison and you visited me.

But these are not the only places where we find similar values. *Isaiah 58:6-7* says, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them?" In *Job 22:7*, Job is criticized by one of his "friends" quote unquote with the words, "You have

given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry." Earlier in the book of Ezekiel, he writes, "If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right ... gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment" (Ezek 18:5, 7; compare also verses 14, 17 ["¹⁴But if this man has a son who sees all the sins that his father has done, considers, and does not do likewise ... gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment"]; BKBC notes that a similar sentiment is present in Rabbinic Jewish literature: "Concerning them who are merciful, who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and distribute alms, Scripture declares: 'Say to the righteous that it will go well with them' [Isa. 3:10]" [BKBC 1:467-68, citing *Derek 'Erets Rabba* 2:21]).

So from the standpoint of God's priorities, both testaments agree: feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, and looking after the sick are at the top of God's list of priorities for his people. And so it comes as no surprise that the only thing that separates the sheep from the goats (on the separation of the two types of animals, see, e.g., Newman and Stine *UBS Handbook* 782 ["*As a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats* reflects Palestinian life. During the day the sheep and goats graze together, but at night they are separated, because goats must be kept warm at night, while sheep prefer to sleep in the open air"]; so also Allison and Davies *new ICC* 3:423 ["The image is probably of a mixed flock of sheep and goats which, although herded together in the day (cf. Gen 30:32), are separated at night so that the latter can be kept warm"]; Hill *NCBC* 331 ["Mixed flocks of sheep and goats are common in Palestine; but in the evening they are separated, because goats must be kept warm at night"]; Gundry *Matthew* 512 ["Palestinian shepherds commonly herded mixed flocks of sheep and goats, but separated the sheep and goats in the evening because sheep prefer the open air at night and goats need the warmth of shelter"]. Luz *Hermeneia* 276 disputes this view ["The exegetes who decide for "goats' claim that in the mixed herds of Palestine the goats had to be separated in the evening from the sheep, because they need more warmth than do the less sensitive sheep. However, this lovely Palestinian pastoral custom exists only on paper. It resulted from a careless reading of Dalman's major work, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*"]. Nolland *NIGTC* 1026 takes a more neutral stance ["The reason regularly offered in the literature for the separation of sheep and goats is the need for goats to be protected from the cold at night in a way that sheep had no need of. But any difference between sheep and goats could become the basis of separation"]; so also France *NICNT* 961-62 ["The purpose of separating the two is not clear, but it is the process, not its purpose, which is the point of the simile"]) is whether they treat "the least of these who are members of my family" with humane compassion.

(slide8) The sheep did, and thus Jesus proclaims, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Matt

25:34), while the goats did not, and thus Jesus proclaims, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41). There is some dispute as to who the least of these who are members of my family are. While some interpreters think that this is a reference to the Christian care of the Christian needy (Gundry, Matthew 514 takes it specifically as a reference to Christians fleeing persecution; Luz Hermeneia 3:279 thinks it refers to “the members of the church, who call one another ‘sisters’ and ‘brothers’”; Keener SRC 604 argues that “this parable probably addresses not serving the poor on the whole but receiving the gospel’s messengers”; Culpepper NTL 500 [“The pattern of this theme in Matthew suggests, therefore, that the ‘least of these’ are those who bear Jesus’ name”]; Hagner WBC 2:745 [“deeds of mercy done to disciples, brothers and sisters, and only by extrapolation to others”]), I prefer to see it as a reference to anyone who comes to the church in need (Beare, Matthew 495; so Allison and Davies new ICC 3:429 [“Is not the identification of the need with all in distress more consistent with the command to ignore distinctions between insiders and outsiders and with Jesus’ injunction to love even enemies?”]; Stine and Newman, UBS Handbook 786 [“At this point Matthew clearly identifies Jesus with those persons who are suffering for whatever reasons”]. Nolland, NIGTC 1032 makes the provocative suggestion that “In any case, ‘brothers and sisters’ here identifies the group on the right as composed of disciples committed to doing the will of Jesus’ Father. There will be an important difference in v. 45, which will make it clear that while the focus here is on disciples who have helped other disciples in need, the Son of Man actually identifies (but not as with a brother or sister) with the needy in their need,” i.e. that the term shifts meaning in the second half of the parable), whether they are Christians or not. That seems to me to be more along the lines of the meaning of hospitality in an ancient context.

III. Pivot to Today

There are a couple of things to notice about this parable, which has been an uncomfortable one for Christians over the years.

(slide9) The first is that there is not a single word in this parable, or in this entire chapter, about what people *believe*. Instead, the entire focus of the chapter is on what people *do*. Why is that uncomfortable? Because it has been seen as a contradiction to the theology that we are saved by repentance and belief in Jesus as the Risen Savior. One of the foremost commentators

on Matthew, R. T. France, puts it this way: "This passage has traditionally been an embarrassment especially to Protestant readers because it appears to say that one's final destiny—and nothing could be much more final than 'eternal punishment' or 'eternal life,' v. 46—depends on acts of philanthropy, a most un-Pauline theology" (France, NICNT 957). But the embarrassing nature of the passage doesn't come from Jesus; Jesus consistently talks about "the weightier matters of the law," all of which involve our relationship with others and the good works we do for them, whether they are our neighbors or our enemies. Instead, the embarrassment stems from the church's tendency to create a rigid wall between what we believe and what we do. And for sure, there are beliefs that separate Christians from non-Christians and I will go to the grave believing them. I *do* believe that repentance and the confession of our sins is important. I *do* believe that there is one God only eternally existing as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. I *do* believe that Jesus is the Son of God incarnate, who came to earth as a human and who lived, was executed, and was raised again. Believing in those kinds of things makes me a Christian, not a Jew or a Muslim or a Buddhist or an atheist. So there are beliefs that separate Christians from other religious groups.

The problem comes when the church believes that the only thing that matters is what we believe, and that what we do and how we act in the world is unimportant. The texts in Matthew 25 should once and for all put that false dichotomy to rest. If what we do, or don't do, can lead to eternal happiness or eternal destruction, then what we do definitely matters as much as what we believe.

(**slide10**) Which leads to the second point of this chapter. Jesus gives us six examples of the kinds of things we are expected to do in verses 34-35, and repeated in negative form as a

judgment against the goats in verses 42-43. But we have to remember that they are *examples*, not a divine checklist that determines whether we are sheep or goats. I have given food and water to strangers and I have given clothes to the needy, but I've never been involved in a prison ministry and I've never provided space in my home for a homeless individual. Do those failures mean that I'm a goat and not a sheep? I don't believe that for a moment. Come to think of it, I've given money to the needy, taken strangers for a ride in my car, and offered my cellphone to someone who needed it when their phone died. Those aren't mentioned in Jesus' list, but they are similar acts of neighborly love to someone else. Do those not matter because Jesus didn't mention them? Again, I don't think that's a right reading of the parable. As times change and as needs change, so will our response to those who are in need. The main thing is for us to do the things that the Shepherd who will separate the sheep from the goats wants us to do and expects us to do. Because if we don't, the consequences for our inaction could be pretty serious.

And so, as we begin the season of Advent next week, let us remember that the coming of the Christ child is both prophecy and promise of the coming of the Christ who will reign as king, and let us choose to live obedient lives, full of faithful good works that we may enter into his kingdom with thanksgiving and joyful praise. Let us remember that the shepherd both expects and demands that we treat “the least of these who are members of my family” as if they were Jesus himself, whether we get any “warm fuzzy” out of it or not. And in treating “the least of these who are members of my family” as if they were Jesus, himself, let us do so with praises on our lips and joy within our hearts, whenever and wherever we encounter our Shepherd-King.

Hallelujah. And Amen.

RISBE 2:262 chart with the texts and correlated dates of Ezekiel's ministry:

E > Ezekiel > IX. Alternative Views and Additional Information > A. Authorship and Locale

Reference ^ v

The date formulas also support single authorship. Thirteen dates are given by day, month, and year, and each is connected with a revelation from Yahweh. These can be equated with our present calendar as follows:

| Ezk. | subject | da | mo | yr | yr 1 = 597/6 |
|--------|---------------------------------|----|-----|----|---------------|
| 1:2 | Opening vision | 5 | 4 | 5 | Jul. 31, 593 |
| 8:1 | Vision in the temple | 5 | 6 | 6 | Sep. 17, 592 |
| 20:1 | Message to the elders | 10 | 5 | 7 | Aug. 14, 591 |
| 24:1 | Report of siege of Jerusalem | 10 | 10 | 9 | Jan. 15, 588 |
| 26:1 | Prophecy against Tyre | 1 | (1) | 11 | (Apr. 23) 587 |
| 129:1 | Prophecy against Pharaoh | 12 | 10 | 10 | Jan. 7, 587 |
| 129:17 | Prophecy to Babylon about Egypt | 1 | 1 | 27 | Apr. 26, 571 |
| 30:20 | Prophecy against Pharaoh | 7 | 1 | 11 | Apr. 29, 587 |
| 31:1 | Prophecy to Pharaoh | 1 | 3 | 11 | June 21, 587 |
| *32:1 | Lamentation over Pharaoh | 1 | 12 | 12 | Mar. 3, 585 |
| 33:21 | Report of Jerusalem's fall | 5 | 10 | 12 | Jan. 8, 585 |
| 40:1 | Vision of restored temple | 10 | 1 | 25 | Apr. 28, 573 |