

Title: The King and The Corrective  
Text: Ezekiel 34:11-16  
November 26, 2017

I feel I need to start with a wee bit of a confession. Though a lifelong Presbyterian, I don't recall being in a church before that intentionally celebrated Christ the King Sunday. It really is a strength of Shepherdstown that you have been mindful about being guided by the church calendar. So then this is the last Sunday of the church calendar – a time to give each other a “high five” – and next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, kicks off the new church year.

There is no question that there are a number of images that reinforce this regal image of Christ the King. In our gospel reading today (which we didn't read) it says, **“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.”** (Matt. 25:31) In Philippians we read of a time when **“at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”** (Phil 2:9 -11) Elsewhere we read that the exalted Jesus is **“King of kings and Lord of lords.”** (Rev. 19:16)

Several of our hymns reinforce this imagery. We sing, **"All hail the power of Jesus' name, let angels prostrate fall. Bring forth the royal diadem, and crown him Lord of All!"** You have to admit, if you need some reinforcement that you are on the winning team, such imagery stirs the heart!

At the same time, others find this imagery problematic. Some call it patriarchal and offensive. Others claim that there have been so few good kings that the image has been irreparably damaged. Volumes have been written about how Jesus actually undermines and redefines our very understanding of kingship.

While I am sure there is value to this imagery – *if properly understood* – I am relieved that we can honor this day with a different image. When I looked at the lectionary options for today, I almost feel as though this reading from Ezekiel is offered to us as a kind of counter-balance, if not a corrective. It reads:

**“For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 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. 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. 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. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. 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...”** Ezekiel 34: 11-16

I rather like it. A description of the reign of God without king imagery. It challenges us to move beyond the throne and consider God's reign afresh. It also challenges our churches to consider how we may have used regal imagery in unhealthy ways. God is not merely a king, safely ensconced in the palace, safely separated from God's subjects. It's an invitation to broaden our understanding of what scripture teaches us about God's reign.

Shepherding has long been an attractive metaphor for religious leadership because of the image of nurturing and tenderness. Psalm 23 has always been greatly beloved.

So instead of the image of the king, we have here the image of a shepherd. God's shepherds have failed to do their job. God's shepherds have not gathered in the weak sheep. God's shepherds have not sought the lost or healed the sick or done what God called them to do. So then God, out of great love for humanity and powerful compassion for the lost, goes forth. **"I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I will make them lie down,"** (v. 15) says the Lord God. **"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..."** (v. 16) God takes off and joins the search. God has left the throne room!

We too need to follow God out of the throne room, *and* we need to confess our reluctance to go. It is understandable that many prefer the comfort of the sanctuary where it is safe and attractive and people mostly look like us.

But to live into God's reign, to obey God's call upon our lives, we must join God in the search, in this great shepherding work. Our God is a wandering God, willing to engage in the nasty, challenging, dangerous work of shepherding. God wants God's followers to get out of the building. To go and search for the lost. To wander into every part of the community. To go where most people would not dare to go. To go into situations that most people would avoid.

It is clear that there are many people in this faith community who have an instinct to join God in the search, rather than waiting for people to come to us. This is the instinct that compels people to go out and host a dinner for migrant workers. This is the instinct that compels people to get to know immigrant families, and provide resources and support for them. This is the instinct that compels some people to volunteer week after week with Jefferson County Community Ministries. This is the instinct that compels others to work with homeless men in Martinsburg. This is the instinct that compels some to offer to be a host family for an international student at Shepherd University. I am sure that there are other examples that I have overlooked where our own have left the comforts of this sacred place to go and comfort God's people in need.

At the same time there are other dimensions to shepherding that we are less inclined to think of. Aside from cuddling lambs, we forget that ancient Near Eastern shepherds sometimes fought valiantly against both animal and human predators. In my mind this conjures up not only images of social compassion, but also images of social justice. Not only are there opportunities to care for migrant workers, but there are also opportunities to valiantly rise up against those who would prey upon these vulnerable sheep. Not only can we compassionately share a dinner with a Muslim family, but we can also rise up against those who would seek to drive the marginalized from our land. To use an image that has always captured my imagination: Not only should we pull the drowning from the river, but we might want to go upstream to see who is throwing these people into the river in the first place!

Yes, it seems that just when we think we have grasped the simple message of the passage, that things become less simple. We discover that God not only leaves the building to gather in the lean, weak sheep; God also brings to judgment those who have taken advantage of these sheep. Just after the part where I stopped the reading earlier, we discover the rest of verse 16 where God says, **"...but the fat and the strong I will destroy."** Say what? God gives the grounds for this harsh judgment in verses 21 and 22: **"Because you pushed with flank and shoulder and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep."**

We read that God "**will feed them with justice**" (verse 22). I love this image. I picture the thin sheep sitting down and feasting sumptuously at a fine banquet of due process, civil rights, economic justice, and equal protection, served on fine linen with toasts to equity and human dignity. The fat sheep choke on the same fare, for as they consume, they will be consumed by God's justice. This day of celebration for the thin sheep will be a day of destruction for the fat sheep. Didn't see *that* coming, did you?

This is a huge corrective. The temptation is to use religious language and religious affiliation to amass political and corporate power. All too often we seem to presume that the Lordship of Christ should convey to us lordship in other arenas. There are some who have wanted to promote the notion of us being a Christian nation, so we could then promote our own into power and influence. Yet we too can become blind to how power corrupts us, and choose to avert our eyes at the sight of the thin, weak sheep all around us. When this happens, our prophetic voice is silenced.

God calls us out of the throne room not just to gather in the weak sheep, but to challenge and speak out against the fat sheep who are ravaging and taking advantage of them. We cannot hunker down in the throne room to avoid the fray.

So as we conclude this church year, this should be more than just an occasion to give each other "high-fives" because we are on "the winning team." This is even more than an occasion to seek out and feed the weak sheep. Truly living in the reign of Christ should be a continual note of caution lest we unwittingly become the fat sheep who have "**butted at all the weak animals**" with our horns until we ourselves have "**scattered them far and wide.**" (34:21)

Amen.

#### **Ezekiel 34: 11-16**

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