

“King and Shepherd”

A sermon by the Rev. Frances Savill

Sunday November 22, 2020

Ezekiel 34:11-24

At Presbytery this past week we had a visit, a virtual visit via Zoom, from the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church.

The Rev. Amanda Currie, our Moderator, stopped by to see how the Presbyterian Churches in our area are doing.

And one of the things she talked about is this sense of grief and loss that we are all experiencing in this pandemic.

We don't see each other week by week.

I haven't shaken hands, or hugged people.

Amanda mentioned this hug deficit – and I thought how right she is, and how many of us are experiencing this.

How many hugs am I down this year?

It's a huge number, and I'm not happy about it.

For lots of us, church was the most constant, weekly place for getting and giving hugs. And with that sense of loss of community – of feeling somewhat scattered, and isolated from all of you, I chose this scripture reading for Christ the King Sunday.

This text from Ezekiel is at its heart about community.

The historical situation that Ezekiel is speaking God's word to is the time of the Babylonian exile.

The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, many people were carted off to Babylon to live.

They are like sheep that have been scattered in all directions, they are without direction, without protection, and without each other.

And into that situation God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel.

God sees, God hears the cries of the people, God sees their lostness and isolation and God is responding.

And in the words of God I find great comfort and hope for us today.

***“God, the Master, says: From now on, I myself am the shepherd. I’m going looking for them. As shepherds go after their flocks when they get scattered, I’m going after my sheep. I’ll rescue them from all the places they’ve been scattered to in the storms. I’ll bring them back from foreign peoples, gather them from foreign countries, and bring them back to their home country. I’ll feed them on the mountains of Israel, along the streams, among their own people. I’ll lead them into lush pasture so they can roam the mountain pastures of Israel, graze at leisure, feed in the rich pastures on the mountains of Israel. And I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I myself will make sure they get plenty of rest. I’ll go after the lost, I’ll collect the strays, I’ll doctor the injured, I’ll build up the weak ones and oversee the strong ones so they’re not exploited.*”**

As I read these words again they seem to me a soothing balm for my weary soul.

The end of our passage speaks of God appointing David as the Shepherd over God’s people, who will shepherd them as God would.

And we know that promise, those words were fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus, the new David – David’s greater Son.

Jesus, our great King, is our Shepherd, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep.

Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of the Father, and is the name that is above every name because he came as the Shepherd of the sheep who not just fed the sheep, but was himself the bread of life, who didn’t just lead the sheep to the streams of still waters, but gives the living water that springs up to eternal life.

Jesus didn’t just bind up the wounds of broken bodies, but touched the lepers and made them clean, he opened the eyes of the blind and gave them sight, he made the lame dance, and cast out the demons setting the possessed free.

Jesus didn’t just provide rest for the weak and weary sheep, but invited us to be yoked with him and to learn his ways so that we would find rest for our very souls.

Jesus knows us, he know all of what our lives are about.

“There is nothing that Jesus does not understand about the heartache that hangs like a cloud over the valley of history. In His own being He feels every separation and loss,

every heart split open with grief, every cry of mourning down the corridors of time. “To us who cry out from the depths of our brokenness for a hand that will touch us, an arm that can embrace us, lips that will kiss us, a word that speaks to us here and now, and a heart that is not afraid of our fears and tremblings; to us, who feel our own pain as no other human being feels it, has felt it, or ever will feel it and who are always waiting for someone who dares to come close- to us has come a man who can truly say, “I am with you.” Jesus Christ is God with us and our every human pain reverberates in his innermost self.” (Brennan Manning “Lion and Lamb”)

This Jesus, the servant-King who died for us, and is now exalted at God’s right hand, the Shepherd of the sheep is the one who calls us by name, and brings us together.

It is this Shepherd that goes after the scattered ones who have been driven away by storms, who are lost, or wandering.

He calls us together as his own people.

This is the heart of what it means to be the church.

From our scattered and hiding, Jesus has carried us, and brought us together to be his flock under his care and watchful eye.

We are all sheep- redeemed and cared for by the same Shepherd.

And that is all good news – wonderful news – hopeful, comforting news.

But the passage doesn’t end there...

There is the word to the flock of God about how we treat each other, and that the shepherd is going to judge between sheep and sheep.

God has told Ezekiel that he is going to bring his people back together, and bring healing and care to the flock.

And God is going to judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ***“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.***

Jesus told his disciples – the flock under his care closest to him, taught by him, and then entrusted with the care of the sheep after him, that they were to serve each other as Jesus served.

They were to have compassion for each other, as Jesus did.

The great commandment is “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Jesus has set us the example.

But God knows that our natural inclination is to push each other to get our own way, to batter each other in competition and take more than our share.

The compassion of Jesus challenges us to give up our false faces, our petty conceits, our irritating vanities, our preposterous pretending, no longer judging myself by how I compare to you, but trusting in the grace of Jesus that is extended to us all.

Jesus calls us to be tender with each other because He is tender.

He calls us to put the needs of our neighbours ahead of our own, and learn to serve as he served.

The Great Shepherd of us all, who binds up our wounds and carries us in his arms, calls us all together, and calls us to learn his ways, together.

Thanks be to God.