

Story and Meditation: Gathered Sheep

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Reign of Christ

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

by *Eric Anderson*

It doesn't happen often. Most of the time, sheep don't get to choose their flocks. They're born, and there's a flock, and that's their flock. If there's another flock around, well, that's not their flock. Every once in a while there might be a shepherd who decides that one big flock would be easier to deal with a two smaller flocks, but even then, it's the shepherd who does the choosing. To the sheep, once the shepherd directs them one way or the other, it's just their flock.

But there were some sheep that were offered the choice. This flock, or that flock.

This flock looked pretty attractive. When you looked it over, what you mostly saw were the sheep in front. They were big. They were pretty. They were well fed. They were strong. When they came to the brook to drink, they were at the front for water. When the mangers were filled with grain, they were at the front for their meal. They enjoyed the best grass. They enjoyed the clean water.

That flock, however, didn't seem to have a group of big, well-fed, attractive sheep. Oh, there were some big ones and there were some small ones, but the big ones didn't gather together the way this did in this flock. In that flock they were spread out, and they didn't lead the rest of the sheep.

Two sheep among those who had to choose studied the two flocks – this flock and that flock – for some time. The first sheep thought this flock looked like the one to choose. “Look at those big sheep,” he said. “I know I'm going to be one of those. Watch them get all the best food and the best water and the best grazing on the hillsides.”

The second sheep wasn't so sure. “But what about the other sheep in this flock?” she asked. “I don't think they're eating well. They get pushed out of the way a lot. And look: when the big sheep are done drinking they leave the water muddy.”

The first sheep shrugged. “I guess that might be happening,” he said, “but in that flock you're never sure what you're going to get. Some days it's the first food, and some days it's the end of the line. I guess they're more careful about dirt in the water, but who wouldn't want to get to the brookside first?”

“Everyone would,” agreed the second sheep, “and in that flock everyone does get to the front eventually. In this flock, it's just the biggest sheep.”

“That works for me,” said the first sheep. “I’ll always be in the front.”

“You will?” asked the second sheep. “Are you so sure you’ll be among the big ones? What if you’re medium sized? What if you’re one of the smaller ones?”

He was quiet. Then she asked one more question: “If you are among the big sheep, are you really willing to take the best for yourself and leave the muddy water, the half-eaten grain, and the trampled grass to everyone who is smaller than you?”

So the sheep – so we human beings – have to choose.

The prophets of Judah had been busy in the years around six hundred years before the birth of Jesus. They lived in times of conflict and change, of fear and of faith, of confidence and catastrophe. The nation had experienced a profound religious, social, and ethical revival under the leadership of King Josiah, but he had died in what later historians concluded was a senseless battle. His successors had been praised by some of the local prophets, but excoriated by others. Here are the assessments as recorded by the theologians/historians of Second Kings:

- Jehoahaz: “He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, just as his ancestors had done,” but only for three months, because an Egyptian Pharaoh deposed him in favor of his brother...
- Jehoiakim: “He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, just as his ancestors had done,” for eleven years. He died and was succeeded by his son...
- Jehoiachin (sorry about the similar names): “He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, just as his father had done,” for three months, when he surrendered the city of Jerusalem to the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar, because his recently deceased father had decided to betray that emperor. He was taken into exile in Babylon along with “the king’s mother, the king’s wives, his officials, and the elite of the land.”

Those elite included a temple priest by the name of Ezekiel. About five years or so after being taken to Babylon, he began a new kind of ministry among the exiles of Jerusalem, a ministry of prophecy, of declaring what he understood of the will of God.

But to return to our list of kings of Judah after Josiah, there is just one more:

- Zedekiah, the uncle of Jehoiachin: “He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, just as Jehoiakim had done. Indeed, Jerusalem and Judah so angered the LORD that he expelled them from his presence.”

It took eleven years and a catalogue of hubris, callousness, and selfishness – and, oh yes, an attempt to rebel against who? Babylon, because that had worked so well before – but under Zedekiah’s leadership the independent Jewish nation founded by freed slaves came to an end.

In 587, a second Babylonian invasion crushed Zedekiah's rebellion, destroyed the Temple of Solomon, knocked down the city walls, and ended even the pretense of a client king.

In the wake of this catastrophe, Ezekiel heard the words we've heard. They were words of hope: "For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out." They were words of promise: "I will bring them out from the people and gather them from the countries." They were words of hope: "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..."

Oh. Wait.

Because they were also words of judgment: "but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice."

I will feed them with justice. Some of you sheep are going to be grateful for that. Some, said Ezekiel... aren't going to like that diet one little bit.

In the crisis of exile, in the loss of home, and in the crumbling of the nation, Ezekiel received a vision of God's renewed grace. Like the captives in Egypt of old, he believed that a time would come when exile would end, home would be restored, and a new nation would arise. The thing I need to emphasize is that he was right. That's why the book became Scripture. Events will give us new perspective on a prophet's claims, won't they?

The new nation, however, could not be a simple copy of the old one. That nation had fallen of its own failings. Its leaders had substituted international gamesmanship for a genuine concern for their own people's welfare. They had embraced foreign idols as a way to form fragile alliances that simply could not stand against a major empire, alliances that impoverished the nation while they failed to protect it, even as the worship weakened the people's commitment to their God and to one another. They had embraced sycophants in the temple priesthood and prophets and actually imprisoned prophets who spoke against their folly, greed, and apostasy.

The restored nation could not look like that. As Carolyn Sharp writes at Working Preacher, "Justice means that God holds bullies accountable. The 'shepherd' metaphor takes an ironic turn in verses 20-22: God's judgment will fall on those sheep that harm the weaker sheep."

We have been buoyed by promising news of coronavirus vaccines in development. They offer the promise – some months ahead – but they offer the promise of a return to normal. If you ignore the idiotic non-leadership of some in this nation, refusing to order sensible public health directives as case counts soar and the United States now grieves a quarter of a million deaths, if you ignore the utter failure to match the success of other nations in restricting infections and death, if you ignore the fact that the United States leads the world in confirmed new cases each day.

That's apparently more than I can ignore. Dawn Strauss Berta wrote on social media this week – and I think she may be the originator, but it's hard to tell: "We're gonna have to retire the expression, 'avoid it like the plague,' because it turns out humans do not do that."

Ezekiel summoned the survivors of Israel to a new and different nation, when it would come to be restored. Likewise, we cannot accept a return to what was. What was didn't work. It left a lot of people out. It enabled people to amass wealth and power and to use it with insufficient restraint. It did not sustain us in a global pandemic.

Seriously. Do we really want to go back to what was?

No. No more fat sheep pushing the little ones. No more shepherds who ignore the welfare of the flock. No more ravaging and no more neglect.

In a better day, we need a better way.

Amen.