Sheep Shoulders

November 22, 2026

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Matthew 25:31-46

On Friday evening, Big Island Singers performed at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Orchidland. It was a first time for us to sing there, and it was a wonderful audience, a lovely space, and really gracious hosts.

If you've been to a Big Island Singers concert here or elsewhere, you've seen us enter a hall. We enter in two lines, side by side, usually down a central aisle. We were set up to do that on Friday, and encountered something more unusual.

The doors into the worship space, where we were singing, were single doors. Not double doors. They weren't wide enough for two people to go through. Just one. Not two. Just one.

Problem.

Okay, it wasn't the world's most complicated problem. We adjusted. A person in one line would go through the door, and then a person in the other line would go through the door, and then a person in that first line would go through the door, and so on. It's the theory of the zipper. Alternate going through, and everyone keeps moving.

People do this sort of thing pretty often, actually. I remember years ago trying to leave the town of Bath, Maine, which is the site of a major shipbuilder. I had very poorly timed my departure; it was the end of a working shift and hundreds of vehicles were moving on roads that simply weren't designed for that many cars. One intersection in particular brought a lot of motorists from a couple different directions, all of them headed for a third street at the crossroads.

Folks in Bath, Maine, had learned. They took turns, first one, then the other, then the first. Nobody moved fast – that wasn't going to happen – but everybody kept moving.

I contrast this to my admittedly limited experience of goats. There's a farm with a goat cheese stand around Honomu, and I stopped there with some guests a few years ago. They allow visitors to come feed the goats, and we did.

Goats do not take turns in line. They came trotting up and pushed one another aside to make sure that they were going to get the goat goodies they confidently expected from a group of people.

I don't know much about sheep, either, but I suspect they don't behave much different from goats. Ezekiel, at any rate, seemed to think that people would be familiar with sheep pushing other sheep aside. They'd have seen big sheep pushing small sheep away.

If they hadn't seen sheep doing that, they'd probably seen wealthy and powerful people pushing poor and powerless people. I suspect you've had that experience. Once or twice. Or more than that. Over and over again.

Despite our capacity to keep things moving by taking turns, by letting others go first, it's also true that human beings can be very good – or very bad, if you want to look at it that way – at pushing flank and shoulder to get to the front of the line, to source of the wealth, to the seats of power.

Laurel Koepf writes at Working Preacher, "The book of Ezekiel comes from a tough place, and it has a tough message. Even in the third, hopeful section of the book, that hope comes with some difficult messages to hear. When the Babylonian Empire conquered Judah, the first thing they did was take the political and religious leaders into exile in Babylon, leaving the everyday folks behind."

Ezekiel himself had been a priest in the Jerusalem Temple, so he was among the religious and civic leaders, which included King Jeconiah, who had been carried away to Babylon. He wrote the Book of Ezekiel in exile, learned of the destruction of the Temple he'd served in exile, lived out his life in exile, spoke and wrote for his fellow exiles according to the direction he received from God.

Ezekiel, like his contemporaries Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Obadiah, and Habakkuk, recognized the role of national leaders in the sorry state of Judah in its last years. The opening verses of chapter 34, which we didn't hear today, addressed the failures of kings, nobles, judges, and priests. As Tyler Mayfield writes at Working Preacher, "God condemns the supposed shepherds/leaders of Israel. These leaders have not truly led the people. They have allowed the people/sheep to scatter and become prey. These shepherds have not fed the flock. This type of leadership is unacceptable and requires divine action in the form of judgment. God judges these shepherds for their poor, inattentive, selfish leadership. They are oppressive! Their job was to watch over the vulnerable."

As I've said before, it didn't take God's intervention to result in the catastrophe of the fall of Jerusalem. The rulers' failures to establish domestic justice, to strengthen the social contract, and to carry out wise foreign policy led pretty inevitably to the two Babylonian invasions that ended their independence as a nation.

The state of the society could not be wholly laid at their feet, however. Some significant number of the people themselves, the sheep in Ezekiel's metaphor, had imitated the rulers in their perversion of justice and their disregard for the poor. They had contributed less – they

had less consequential impact on the nation – but they had definitely contributed to the sorry state of affairs in sixth century Judah.

"Justice," writes James Limburg at Working Preacher, "(mishpat) is the expected response of God's people to what God has done for them (Isaiah 5:1-7). It is a response which is not static but dynamic (Amos 5:21-14; Micah 6:6-8) and which involves taking up the cause of the powerless — represented by the widow, the orphan and the poor (Isaiah 1:17; 21-26; 10:1-4). In our time, as in Isaiah's, the special responsibility for those in positions of public responsibility is care for the powerless (Isaiah 10:1-4; Bob Dylan's song)."

The rulers didn't care for the poor. The wealthier among the populace didn't care about the poor. When nobody with resources and influence cares about the poor, the society crumbles. When nobody with resources and influence cares about the poor, God judges.

Jesus took up the theme differently in his story about a last judgment, the conclusion of a series of stories about the need to actively await the advent of the realm of God. Jesus didn't include any shepherds in his story. In Jesus' day the rulers were not, by and large, attentive to the words of prophets. John the Baptist, you remember, spoke in much the same vein as prophets like Ezekiel, and was executed for it by Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. Figures like the Roman Emperor were too far away and too disconnected from the faith of Israel for Jesus to say much they'd hear (Roman Emperors did start hearing Jesus' words, but it took a couple centuries).

So Jesus told a story about the judgment of ordinary people and their ordinary actions – or inactions. Did you feed the hungry? Did you give water to the thirsty? Did you welcome the stranger? Did you clothe the naked? Did you visit the sick or imprisoned? You did? Good. Excellent. Well done. You didn't? Well. Not good.

Not good at all.

It's still important for a society, a community, to institute care for its most vulnerable members. Governments have a proper role in food and shelter programs, schools, job training, and support for medical care. Sometimes it is to provide information and coordination among private actors. Sometimes it is to provide the backbone services itself. Sometimes it is to discourage, though law, those who would take advantage of the vulnerable.

We also have a responsibility based in our common humanity as well as in the specific instruction of our God: love your neighbor as yourself. At minimum, we can't be the sheep who pushes others out of the way. More than that, though, we can be the sheep that invites others forward to see they eat what they need.

I've felt the press of sheep shoulders pushing on me from time to time. I'm sure you have.

Let's make sure that nobody feels the pressure of our shoulders. Let's make sure they hear a. clear invitation to be strong.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson