

Jonathan Mark
FMC Reedley
Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 25:31-46
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Woe to the Shepherds

Good Morning Church. This week I had the absolute pleasure of studying the scriptures. I started this week thinking, I'm going to focus on Matthew 25, when you give someone something to eat or welcome them or visit them, you are doing this for Jesus. But then I read the entirety of Ezekiel 34 and absolutely fell in love. So I invite you into a journey of appreciating Ezekiel, we usually only read him for his valley of dry bones, but he is so much more than that. And through his vision of God being the good shepherd to God's people, I hope we can find a foretaste of what Christ is saying in the gospel of Matthew.

Please pray with me. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you. Our good shepherd and source of hope.

Why is everything horrible in the world?

This question seems especially poignant in today's time. There are great wars happening around the world. We have endured a great pandemic that has left us forever changed. Many are feeling the pinch of inflation and some of our own members have struggled to pay the bills. All the while corporations are making record profits. Who is to blame? Who, to quote the Grapes of Wrath, do we need to shoot?

We've heard many answers. If we're racist, we may say it's immigrants or a particular ethnic group. Or the economists among us will point to the housing market or supply chains. People thinking about elections may say it's too much money in politics, gerrymandering, or if we even have a democracy. Or maybe it's your least favorite political party or nation. But in today's scripture passage, Ezekiel looks at the disaster that is God's people in exile in Babylon. And proclaims, 'Woe to you shepherds.'

The Shepherd is a metaphor used for gods and kings in the Bible and the surrounding nations. In the law code of Hammurabi, King Hammurabi calls himself the people's shepherd. Calling kings shepherds also shows up in Judges, Samuel, and in Jeremiah 23, which reads.

"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" Jeremiah 23:1

Does that sound like Ezekiel to you?

Ezekiel does not pull any punches in his scathing rebuke of Israel's kings. Ezekiel is saying that they ruled harshly, the same word used to describe how Pharaoh treated the Israelite slaves in Egypt. Their own kings were gluttonous, killing the fatted calf, feeding themselves. Their own kings overgrazed the pasture and fouled up the communal watering hole. Their own kings made people food for wild animals, scattering them over the face of the earth.

Cruelty and selfishness.

Have any of you observed those characteristics in our own leaders?

Are we doomed to the warning of Sammaul, that kings will take from the people and make them like slaves in Egypt? Ezekiel is not that sour. The Lord God shall gather the lost, bind the injured, and give them good pastures where they can lie down and rest. What more, God will destroy the fat and the strong. Or to borrow from the French Revolution, when the people have nothing to eat, they shall eat the rich.

Then God shall be the true shepherd. Let me read from the later part of this chapter.

I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil, and they shall know that I am the LORD when I break the bars of their yoke and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid.” Ezekiel 34:26-28

This is Ezekiel's vision of the mountain of the Lord. A vision of peace, full of agricultural bliss and freedom from the horrors of war. What a beautiful vision. Which brings me to Jesus. Jesus is also the true shepherd and calls us to be good shepherds. To look after each other as God would look after us in Ezekiel's vision. Jesus calls us to be the kind of leaders that Israel's kings never could be. And when our own leaders fail us, when the world seems to be full of woe, it falls to us to take care of each other. To bind each other's wounds, to welcome the lost. This week I kept thinking who are the least of these that Jesus is calling us to care for and I realized that they are all of us.

I know that many of you are well acquainted with hardships. Some of you have endured things I could not even imagine surviving. Just yesterday we celebrated the anniversary of how a hail storm destroyed Paul Buxman's crop, and you'll find the point of today's sermon in that tale. Forces outside our control will wreck our crops, take away our health, or ruin the economy. And how we get through life's difficulties by coming together and taking care of each other. So Paul makes jam out of bruised fruit and we buy it. Amen.