

**“What’s for Dinner?”**  
Sermon by Lisa Crismore  
November 20, 2011 – John Knox Presbyterian Church

*Ezekiel 34: 11-6; 20-24 “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flock 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, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice...*

*Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will 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, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.*

*I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.*

Margaret Wise Brown writes, “Once there was a little bunny, who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, “I am running away.” “If you run away”, said his mother. “I will run after you for you are my little bunny,” “If you run after me,” said the little bunny, “I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you.” If you become a fish in a trout stream,” said his mother, I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.” “If you become a fisherman and fish for me, said the little bunny, “I will become a bird and fly away from you.” If you become a bird and fly away, said his mother, “I will become a tree that you come home to.”

The story continues with the little bunny trying to figure out a way to get away from his mother and his mother always comes up with a way to find her little bunny. Finally, the little bunny gives in and his last place to run to is his home and the mother says, “If you run home,” said the mother bunny, “I will catch you in my arms and hug you.” “Shucks” said the bunny. “I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny,” And so he did. “Have a carrot,” said the mother bunny. (Runaway Bunny; by Margaret Wise Brown; 1942; Harper & Row; Publishers, Inc.)

Runaway Bunny is one of my favorite children’s books. It tells this wonderful story of a loving parent, who will search and seek out their child that has runaway. They will go to the ends of the earth to find them and care for them. This is so comforting!

The prophet Ezekiel is telling the people of Israel something very similar. They have run away or turned away from God. They have been sent into exile. But the king and religious leaders, who were to take care of the Israelites, have not done their job. God’s people are suffering because of this. They are oppressed, starved, separated from family and they have lost all hope.

Ezekiel offers light to their darkness by promising that God will step in and be their shepherd. God will show them how it should be done. A shepherd in those days cared, fed, protected and searched for the lost sheep. The faithful shepherd is willing to risk their life trying to protect and save their sheep entrusted in their care.

This is a very comforting image to God’s people. As I shared with you, I went to Rockville Women’s Prison a couple of weeks ago. This is one of the images that we try to communicate to

the women. God will not leave you. Even though, you might turn away from God. Your loving creator will find you and welcome you back anytime with open arms. This is reassuring for them as many of them have been lost or unloved. Many have not had loving parents, who have taken care of them. Even when they were placed in the care of foster parents, many of them were abused. Some of them have been on drugs since they were in grade school. Then there are the bad choices in life, which led to the crime that landed them in prison. It is hard for these women to believe that God still loves them. At the closing, all of the women are given a chance to get up and share what the retreat has done for them.

They are overwhelmed with the unconditional love that they have felt. Lost, spiritually empty, hopelessness, broken, wounded are the words they use to describe their feelings before the retreat. Then with tears of joy, they speak of hope, love, spiritual fullness and healing that have taken the place of their despair. As the new or renewed found relationships with God their shepherd takes shape, one of the key things of the Kairos ministry is to continue to return to help these women know that they are not alone. I have never been able to do this but yesterday I did return for a reunion meeting. We had 37 out of the 42 return.

These women are being encouraged to support each other on the inside of the prison. But like sheep, they need constant care during the first part of their faith journey. Our hope is that they will learn to pray for each other and to support one another in this dark place.

God as our faithful shepherd is very comforting to all of us. But the message from Ezekiel doesn't end here. About midway through this passage, Ezekiel throws us a curve ball. We get all comfortable as we have these flashback memories of Psalm 23, which is a passage that many of us memorized as children.

We have this nice fuzzy warm feeling as we read verse 16, "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthened the weak, BUT...BUT... the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice..." I don't know about you but I want to grab a Q-tip and clean out my ears to make sure I heard this correctly.

But then to clarify where God stands, Ezekiel continues, "God will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you punched 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 go from being comfortable to uncomfortable, when we hear these words. Firmly, the loving parent God states that our focus is to be on those in need. We do not want to be the fat sheep! The focus and care that is required here is the model of the shepherd. When am I willing to give it all for the least of my brothers and sisters? I don't know about you but most of the time Lisa Crismore likes to have her belly full of her wants and needs before I can even think about those who don't have any! In fact, I can't think of any day that I have gone hungry because I have been so focused on my neighbors, who are in great need. It is easy to write a check or bring in food for the food pantry. In all honesty, I would prefer to do the 4 day retreat at Rockville Prison and not return for another 1 - 1 ½ years. In comparison to some on the Kairos team, they will go out each Saturday and follow-up with these woman on a weekly or monthly basis. It is a long way out to Rockville. I'm not sure I want to commit to this. I made the mistake of looking up why they are in prison and it is not pretty! Ezekiel's words are difficult. I will be the first to admit that it is hard to roll-up my sleeves and get down in the muck and the dirt like the shepherd and do God's work day-in / day-out? I want the easier jobs. I want the fun stuff!

But I don't think I am the only one. I know John Knox helps out those in need. There are the Simpson's in El Salvador, Back Pack Attack, hat and mitten tree at Christmas. We help a lot of people. But I think there is still work for us to do. Why is it that we have 60-some people attend a

hayride but we only have 8 people participate in a neighborhood prayer walk? Why do we have 120-130 people show up for the PW Christmas or Spring dinners but we had 3 participate in the CROP walk for hunger this year? Why do we have over 170 people attend the Shepherd and Sheep luncheon but it is the same faithful 5-8 people serve the homeless each month for Interfaith Hospitality Network or the Deacons are scurrying every month to find ushers or greeters to welcome the strangers into the church? Now please don't get me wrong. I believe fellowship is important. God's Word encourages us to gather together in community with one another. But God's Word also makes it clear that we are to take care of the weak, seek out the lost and feed the hungry, because one day we will be judged.

Frederick Buechner writes this about judgment, *"We are all of us judged every day. We are judged by the face that looks back at us from the bathroom mirror. We are judged by the faces of the people we love and by the faces and lives of our children and by our dreams. We are judged by the faces of the people we do not love. Each day finds us at the junction of many roads, and we are judged as much by the roads we have not taken as by the roads we have.*

*When the Day of Judgment arrives, Christ will be the judge. In other words, the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.*

*Romantic love is blind to everything except what is lovable and lovely, but Christ's love sees us with terrible clarity and sees us whole. Christ's love so wishes our joy that it is ruthless against everything in us that diminishes our joy. The worst sentence LOVE can pass is that we behold the suffering the LOVE has endured for our sake, and that is also our acquittal. The justice and mercy of the judge are ultimately one."* (Beyond Words; by Frederick Buechner; 2004; Harper San Francisco Publisher; p. 206-207)

This week we will gather around the table with our loved ones. May we be fed a meal of thanksgiving and not a meal of justice. May we praise God and eagerly engage in the opportunity to serve Christ even as a lowly shepherd. Amen.