

“A Shepherd for Our Journey”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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Ezekiel 24:11-16; 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 flocks 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 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 the1m and be1 the1ir shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them: I, the Lord, have spoken.

My grand dog, Beau or Beaumont Blue, is an Australian Shepherd. If I were to describe him, I would say that he is loving, full of energy and very protective! When our dogs and other grand dogs are out in the backyard, it is Beau, who is always trying to herd and lead them. He is definitely friendly to all we meet on our walks at Eagle Creek. I have to admit that there are times when I will break the rules and let him off his leash so that he can run and burn off energy. He is very loyal and attentive so he will not run off. He will get 20 feet ahead and as soon as he hears his name called, he comes back to me.

Now, I would say he is friendly and would not hurt anyone until an event that occurred last December. I had given a friend a key to drop something off at my house while we were out of the house shopping for Christmas. As we were out doing our errands, I got a call from my friend. She said that she was at my house and was attempting to turn the key to open the door when Beau went crazy barking and growling! She said that she did not want to go into the house because it was clear he did not want her in there while his grandma was not there! When we got home, we saw the window blinds that took the beating from Beau's protective instincts!

I have never been around a true shepherd. I am sure not many of us have since we live in the city. Some of you may have grew up on a farm and have experienced what it takes to be a shepherd. We have watched shepherds in movies. As I have watched Beau, the Australian Shepherd, it is no wonder that today's ranchers have bred this kind of dog to help with the care of their animals.

Probably for most of us, we connect to the term of “shepherd” as it appears in the Bible. In fact, two weeks from now we will see our Advent Visitors, the shepherds, appearing in the hallway as they start their journey to Bethlehem. Many of us recall the familiar Psalm 23 passage that was just recently used at Ken Duggins' funeral a few weeks ago. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.”

A shepherd's job is to tend and care for the sheep. They protect, guide, seek out the lost, care for the injured, make sure they are fed and rested, keeps them together and protects them from harm. A shepherd puts the sheep first and may lay down their life when protecting them from

danger! The sheep were valuable. The people of Biblical times knew that a shepherd's job was important! The sheep's survival depended on the Shepherd.

This is exactly the message that God is sending through his prophet Ezekiel today. The only thing is the sheep were God's people and God is promising to step in and take on the job of shepherd. There will be "One" Shepherd and this will come from the divine creator.

This is huge for the people during the Babylonian exile. They have been separated and scattered. They are not with their families. Their normal life and home has been taken away from them. They fear the future and all that lies ahead. There has been violence that has destroyed the temple in Jerusalem.

The prophet Ezekiel has lived through all of this as he has walked this journey of exile with the Israelites. He knows that the reason the Israelites were sent into exile was because they were worshipping false idols and were disobedient to God. But once in exile, there were to be people who were to take care of them.

Commentator, Denise Dombkowski Hopkins says, "In the ancient Near East, shepherd was used as a name for the king, who, as a servant of the Deity, was expected to provide for his people and rule them with justice." (Feasting on the Word; Year A - Volume 4; Westminster John Knox Press; 2011; p. 317) It is unclear who these kings or rulers were - national or foreign? What was clear was that they were taking their share and the share of everyone else under their rule. They were getting fat! It is no doubt that they were using their power and their status for selfish reasons. These kings were not acting as the shepherds they were being called to be. The strong were bullying the weak and God was not happy!

We hear the Lord speak, *"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."

As God steps in, it is clear that there will be "One" shepherd. God has chosen to take matters into God's divine hands by seeking care and justice for God's people to be restored to the community they once knew. This is the goal! God will name his shepherd David and he will rule as king to do God's work. David will be the one accountable to God, making it clear that God is the one in charge.

We celebrate today "Christ the King" Sunday. One may wonder why then we find ourselves hearing from the prophet Ezekiel. We know King David did come and tried to be obedient to God by caring and seeking justice for those people he ruled. Yet, he was only human.

It was only until God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, who was a descendant of David and was God incarnate did we receive a true king and shepherd. Jesus, who is both human and divine and brings hope to us all.

We find ourselves in our own exile - separated, scattered, not knowing about our future, many of us are hurting, some of us experiencing the sharp jabs from the injustice of the powerful. We yearn for a shepherd to come and save us. We welcome on this Christ the King Sunday the promise that Christ is here and Christ will restore us.

How do we do this? Sure our faith takes part in this but how do we put our faith into action? I was asking my therapist this week about how do I get away from the negative thoughts. How do I stay in the moment?

She said each day take time to list 5-10 things of gratitude. Of course, I knew this. But, it was huge to have this reminder. And just as we celebrate Thanksgiving, one of the things my family has done for years is to go around the circle before we pray and say the things in life were we give thanks to God for receiving. Where in life am I thankful? Where in life am I grateful?

Brother David Stindl-Rast speaks a lot about gratitude. He is a renowned spiritual leader and Benedictine monk, who lives in Austria. David was raised with the focus of gratitude. Listen to the poem a Good Day a Gift of Gratitude by David Stindl-Rast. (Text by David Stindl-Rast; 2013' Sterling Ethos, New York, An Imprint of Sterling Publishing)

It's not just another day; it's the one day that is given to you...today.

It's given to you. It's a gift. It's the only gift that you have right now, and the only appropriate response is gratefulness.

If you do nothing else but to cultivate that response to the great gift that this unique day is, if you learn to respond as if it were the first day of your life, or the very last day, then you will have spent this day very well.

Begin by opening your eyes and be surprised that you have eyes you can open, that incredible array of colors that is constantly offered to us for pure enjoyment.

Look at the sky. We so rarely look at the sky. We so rarely not how different it is from moment to moment with clouds coming and going.

We just think of the weather, and even of the weather we don't think of all the many nuances of weather. We just think of good weather and bad weather.

This day right now has unique weather, maybe a kind that will never exactly in that form come again.

The formation of clouds in the sky will never be the same that it is right now. Open your eyes.

Look at that. Look at the faces of people who you meet. (We have to look at faces with masks so we have to connect to people's eyes.)

Each one has an incredible story behind their face, a story that you could never fully fathom, not only their own story, but the story of their ancestors. We all go back so far.

And in this present moment on this day, all the people you meet, all that life from generations and from so many places all over the world flows together and meets you here like a life-giving water, if you only open your heart and drink.

Open your heart to the incredible gifts that civilization gives to us. You flip a switch and there is electric light.

You turn a faucet and there is warm water and cold water – and drinkable water. It's a gift that millions and millions in the world will never experience. (This reminds me of my friends in the Dominican Republic and remembering to be thankful for warm and safe water.)

So these are just a few of an enormous number of gifts to which you can open your heart.

And so I wish for you that you would open your heart to all these blessings and let them flow through you, that everyone whom you will meet on this day will be blessed by you; just by your eyes, just by your presence.

Let the gratefulness overflow into blessing all around you, and then it will really be a good day.

A story of gratitude for this day. Iglesia Hermandad Cristiana is dedicating their refurbished new sanctuary today. It will be online since they have not met in-person since March. They worship in Westview Christian Church's original sanctuary. The leadership was looking for ways to expand their space. They discovered that what they thought was a storage room and a "cry room" for children in the back was really the original front of the sanctuary with a beautiful stonewall. They requested permission to tear down the wall between the room and the sanctuary, build a chancel

and repaint. What used to give them space to worship 70 people now will give them space to worship 140 people.

The members offered to use their skills and gifts to do the renovation so they did not have to pay for labor. You may ask about the rest of the materials and expenses. Once Bere Gill Soto, their pastor, started sharing this story with others. The word got out. There was a couple, who had held back their stimulus checks. They gave the funds, which purchased the new chairs. Fundraisers have covered the rest.

This time of Covid has allowed them to tear up and remodel this space. It truly has been a blessing and a reason to give thanks and show gratefulness. Christ the shepherd is giving them hope and new life in this restoration of space. It is a gift that will allow them to grow. Thanks be to God for Christ the King. Amen.