

# Like Sheep without a Shepherd

By  
The Reverend Dr. Agnes Norfleet  
From the Pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Ezekiel 34:1-5, 20-26

The word of the Lord came to me: <sup>2</sup> Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: To the shepherds—thus says the Lord God: Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup> You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup> You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. <sup>5</sup> So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and scattered they became food for all the wild animals. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. <sup>21</sup> Because you pushed with flank and

shoulder and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, <sup>22</sup> I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged, and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

<sup>23</sup> I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup> And I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I the Lord have spoken. <sup>25</sup> I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. <sup>26</sup> 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.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup> He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. <sup>32</sup> And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. <sup>33</sup> Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. <sup>34</sup> As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things. <sup>53</sup> When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. <sup>54</sup> When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him <sup>55</sup> and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. <sup>56</sup> And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

It is nice to hear this invitation of Jesus just now at the end of June – “Come away and rest a while.” As a congregation – we come and go pretty much all summer long even if our getting away is not always restful. There are vacations, of course, but also travel for work or conferences or mission trips – which may provide a break from the regular rhythm of things, but sometimes these trips hardly count as restful because we tend to carry with us concerns for the world.

We just returned Tuesday evening from a wonderful time in France accompanying the Sanctuary Choir’s tour, but with the travel home came a slight head cold, and I am still having a hard time sleeping past the morning wake-up hour in Paris. I’ve returned so proud of this church’s music ministry after listening to our incredibly talented choir in stunningly beautiful and historic sanctuaries with great crowds in attendance. We are home refreshed by absorbing so much history, art and culture, delighted that the consumption of exquisite meals was overmatched by high daily step counts from walking everywhere. We are grateful for experiences shared with friends old and new, as well as the cultural exchanges we encountered.

For example, I will not forget the poignant and tragic stories of Ukrainian refugees we met early in the tour. At dinner before a joint concert with a

Ukrainian choir, I was seated with young mothers from Ukraine raising young children in a foreign country, in a blend of my rusty French and the English they had learned in school but rarely spoke, they shared grieving the devastation of their homeland, sadly admitting they have family and friends scattered from Poland and Germany to California. That conversation was a tragic reminder that most who immigrate are forced to leave a homeland by necessity, escaping war, violence, hunger, death. So while we were there hearing the stories out of Ukraine, we were connected to home enough to see more masked, anonymous ICE agents continuing to terrorize innocent people, separating families and sending folks to God knows where.

“Come and rest a while,” Jesus says, but what is happening in our homeland is exhausting. In the eleven days we were abroad, there were also politically motivated assassinations in Minnesota, and we entered Israel’s war by dropping massive bombs on Iran while doing little about the cruel violence, civilian casualties and increasing famine in Gaza.

“Come away and rest awhile,” Jesus said to the disciples, but in living with this text I have found myself feeling less like a disciple and more like one in the crowds, desperate for the hope and healing Jesus offers when, with compassion, he describes the crowds saying, “they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

“They were like sheep without a shepherd” is no throw away line, no first century expression, but rather a throw-back to Old Testament prophecy and prayer for people who were exhausted from oppression, from political chaos and cruelty. “They were like sheep without a shepherd” is the reminder of promises that had sustained generations of believers -- in God to Shepherd them, to lead and care for them, so that they would not fall exhausted. From the 18<sup>th</sup> Century BC, as long ago as Hammurabi in Old Babylon, seventeen hundred and fifty years before Christ, the word Shepherd referred to the figure of a King.<sup>1</sup> It is a political title, not merely a pastoral one. Toward the end of his life, in Numbers 27:17, Moses had prayed that when he died the Lord would send them another leader so that God’s people would “not be like sheep without a shepherd.” During Jeremiah’s time – when the people had been displaced by war and violence, and exiled, God said, “I will gather the remnant of my flock and bring them back into their fold.”

But, according to biblical scholars, the most important text concerning the imagery of Shepherd and Sheep is from our first reading today in Ezekiel 34. Ezekiel refers to vulnerable royal subjects being poorly treated by a political establishment that neglected the needs and welfare of their people by enriching themselves in self-serving indulgence. The covenant people

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Good Shepherd and the Bad Ones”, churchanew.org, Nov. 8, 2024.

of ancient Israel had begged God to let them have a king, so they could be like other nations, but over time kings arose who ceased to care for the broad welfare of their citizens. Listen carefully, and you can tell this religious, prophetic speech is also political language: “Prophesy against the shepherds - thus says the Lord God: Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves... but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep... I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them and be their shepherd. I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish those who threaten them, so that they may live and sleep securely.” This is God’s desire for the treatment of the displaced, of immigrants, the poor.

When the crowds pressed in upon Jesus and His disciples, who were exhausted from their first missionary tour of teaching and healing, who had just suffered the political assassination of John the Baptist and buried him, Jesus likens those crowds to “sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus is

speaking to us, having compassion upon our world, reminding God's people, from ancient of days, that God desires for all people the essentials for the life of a sheep – food, clean water, shelter, freedom from fear, and peace. The current political administration in the United States of America obviously has the power to drop bombs on another country, to terrorize innocent immigrants, to remove essential food, medicine and services from impoverished people here at home and all over the world, and to exhaust all of us by leading with racist cruelty. However, they do not have the biblical authority to invoke the name of God as a partner in governance, that, how does Ezekiel say it?, “Pushes with flank and shoulder and butts at all the weak with your horns until you scattered them far and wide.” God does not endorse dropping bombs; God showers the people with blessing and peace. God desires us to have empathy, as Jesus has compassion for the crowds yearning for food and healing and hope.

That's why Jesus invokes the imagery of the prophet Ezekiel who promised that God's sheep would sleep safely at night and no one would make them afraid; for leaders of people should assure freedom from want and fear. Friends, Jesus acknowledges human exhaustion and reminds us of our need for rest. Especially for those who feel called to carry out Jesus' ministry and mission. On a number of occasions Jesus himself seeks a “deserted place” for his own rest and renewal. Here Jesus invites

us, those who share in his ministry to do the same. However, Jesus never abandons his compassion. His compassion for the crowds is inexhaustible. He never loses sight of those “sheep without a shepherd” who are the sick, the hungry, and those oppressed by all manner of political forces intended to deny them the abundance of life God intends for all. Perhaps we are able to rest when we need to precisely because - maybe even only because - the compassion of Christ is inexhaustible.

Henri Nouwen described the kind of compassion Jesus showers upon us, saying: “Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.”<sup>2</sup>

That’s who Jesus is, God’s human compassion. Especially toward the sheep without a Shepherd. That is the kind of compassion Jesus expects his disciples to show forth as we seek to follow him.

AMEN.

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Compassion: Reflection on the Christian Life*.