

The shepherd in the manger * Ezekiel 34
November 29, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

This morning we are going to do double duty here as we wrap up our HIFI/LOFI series and launch into the Advent season. And to do that, I am going to draw from the time of the Exile to talk about Christmas.

Because when you've heard the Christmas story as many times as we have, it's nice to get a new perspective on it, isn't it? I went through a did a quick guesstimate based on our average congregation and I think that all together, we've heard the Christmas story 2918 of times. And no, I'm not going to tell you how old I think all of you are 😊

But when you've heard the Christmas story 2918 number of times, it's nice to get a fresh take on it, isn't it? So I'm going to use a prophet from the time of the Exile to talk about the birth of Jesus this morning and that prophet is Ezekiel.

Now Ezekiel is another one of the big ones – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel – that's where you'll find him in the Bible – and God said a lot through the prophet Ezekiel. And here in Ezekiel 34, we're going to see God doing two things – first, looking back to the problems that got Israel into trouble in the first place and second, the solution that God Himself is going to provide. So join me at Ezekiel 34.

1 The word of the LORD came to me:

2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?

And the answer is - of course they should! Job number one for a shepherd is take care of the flock and the shepherds in Israel though were not doing that. And we're not talking about literal shepherds here – the shepherds are the kings of Israel, the community leaders, the religious leaders. The people with God-given authority and responsibility to take care of God's people! They all have this duty to shepherd God's people...

And yet, that's not what they did. Verse 2 – the shepherds only took care of themselves (back before the Exile, they were seeking their own interests at the flock's expense – and now they were Exile because of it). Verse 3 tells us what they were doing –

3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. (You get rich off the people you are supposed to provide for).

4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

These people had been given the responsibility of caring for God's people and they failed miserably at it. They have prospered at the expense of people they were supposed to care for. And so, verse 5

5 So they (the people of Israel) were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals.

6 My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them (Eze 34:1-6 NIV).

That's the Exile. Because the leaders of Israel used their power and privilege to benefit themselves and not the flock, the whole nation got off track and so off they went into Exile. 'Shepherds' and sheep alike.

And that's no good. And God knows that. And so, verses 7-10, God says 'I am going to hold them accountable.' Verse 10:

10 This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them (Eze 34:7-10 NIV).

They're done. They used their authority selfishly, for their own benefit, and so through the Exile, God's removing them from power. He is holding them accountable for what they have done.

Well that's good, but is it really fair for the whole nation to go into exile because of its leaders? Sure, the shepherds were guilty but what about the sheep?

Slide down to verse 17 and you'll see –

17 " 'As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats.

18 Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?

19 Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

Do you see what's happening here? The people have seen their leaders acting selfishly and they have decided that they can act selfishly too. They're like the cows on my dad's farm, setting up a pecking order, the strong benefiting from the weak. Verse 21, He says 'you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away...' Instead of the strong caring for the weak, the rich caring for the poor – as it should be amongst God's people – the haves are exploiting the have nots and getting rich off their backs. That's not the way it should be. If God has given you influence, you need to use it for the benefit of others, but that's not what the leaders did, that's not what the people did. And so, verse 20 -

20 " 'Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.

And because all the sheep were lo-fi, off they went, into exile.

But God is a HIFI God. He didn't want to leave them in Exile; He wanted them to come back to Him, to return to Him and to be restored to the land that He gave them in the first place. And so He makes this commitment to them. Verse 11 –

11 " 'For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

(If you're into writing in your Bible, underline every time God's says 'I' here, because He is wholesale committing to take care of His sheep.

...I will search for my sheep and look after them.

12 As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. (The Exile).

13 I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land.

14 I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. – He's promising to bring them back from Exile and to restore them to the land of Israel AND verse 15 –

15 I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD.

16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

Everything that the leaders of Israel failed to do? God says – "I myself will do it." "I will tend my sheep. I will bind up the injured. I will seek the lost."

And if you slide down to verse 23 – He explains how He's going to do it:

23 I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.

24 I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

Now by the time of the Exile, David was long gone – but remember the promise God made to him back in 2 Samuel 7? David, I'm giving you an everlasting throne? Well, God is making good on that – and so he says - 'I am going to make a son of David shepherd over my people Israel, and bring them back through him.'

And God did that. When the exiles came back, they were led by a descendant of David named Zerubbabel (Ezra 1, 2; Haggai 1:1) and he and other shepherds got the Israelites back on the right path.

But the problem of spiritual exile still remained – people were still separated from God because of sin. The people were back from exile but their hearts were not fully restored to God – so zoom ahead a few hundred years – to a manger in Bethlehem – and who's in the manger? Jesus, the Son of David, the Son of God, who will sit on His father's throne, who will shepherd His people the way God intended. Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise. Jesus is the shepherd sent to bring us back from spiritual exile and to restore us to God.

Remember the parable about the shepherd who goes out to find that one lost sheep? That's this in action. Remember how Jesus called Himself 'the Good Shepherd?' That's this in practice. Remember how Jesus said He would lay down His life for the sheep. That's this. Jesus is God coming to search for the lost and bring back the strays and rescue the sinner and bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, just like He said He would do here in Ezekiel 34:11.

There's a shepherd in that manger – in fulfillment of Ezekiel 34 – and His name is Jesus. Jesus is the shepherd that God promised.

Now, what does it mean for Jesus to be our shepherd? Well, let me give you two ideas:

First, if Jesus is your Shepherd, then let Him lead. If Jesus is your shepherd, then He has brought you back from spiritual exile and restored you to God. Like any good shepherd, He has put Himself in harm's way to rescue you and you are His. Follow Him. Don't go off on your own, deciding for yourself what's right and wrong. Go where He leads. Walk in His ways.

And know beyond a shadow of a doubt that He is looking out for your best interests at every turn. Let Him lead you by green pastures and still waters. Let Him bind up the broken parts of your life. If you are straying, hear Him calling your name and come back to Him. Shepherds do give their sheep a fair bit of autonomy but they are always oriented towards the shepherd; same here. Keep your eyes on the Shepherd and go where He goes.

And second, let's think about this in terms of coronavirus. There's lots of news about potential vaccines and that's good. That's great news! And the leaders will do the best they can to get it out to us. But you know what? Some of them are going to mess it up. Some of them, I'm sure, will be looking to make a buck along the way. Some of them, I'm sure, will be like the shepherds of Israel who got rich at the sheep's expense.

But our hope is not in them, is it? Our hope is in our Shepherd, who laid down His life to preserve us. He will hold false shepherds accountable and He Himself will lead us through this storm. He will bring us through the exile called COVID-19 and He will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak; He will shepherd the flock with justice. We can trust Him to do what's right and what needs to be done for us to thrive. And as we wait for the vaccine and make good decisions and help others out – His goodness and mercy will follow us, all the days of our lives and we shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Because the baby in the manger is the shepherd God promised.

BENEDICTION

20 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,

21 equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

(Hebrews 13:20-21 NIV).