

Sermon: Longing for the Kingdom We're Working Toward

Year A, Reign of Christ

[Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7a; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46](#)

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Who wouldn't want the world of Ezekiel? Rescued from dark and isolation. (Ezekiel 34:12) Brought securely home. (Ezekiel 34:13) With rich and abundant meals. (Ezekiel 34:13-14) Brought together with others like them. (Ezekiel 34:13) Healed of their injuries. (Ezekiel 34:16) Their weaknesses strengthened. (Ezekiel 34:16) That's what we want for those we love, for our parents or our kids. The world of Ezekiel sounds pretty good.

At least until we get to *but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.* (Ezekiel 34:16). I'm not sure what being fed on justice means exactly, but I think that would be a meal that would be really hard to choke down. I'm pretty sure I don't ever want to be fed justice. Certainly not the justice I deserve. Put that way, Ezekiel's world starts to sound a lot more like what Matthew is describing, where the sheep go one way and the goats go another. And Matthew is describing the end of the world.

If we could be sure we could be sure we were on Team Sheep, or even Team Skinny Sheep, then we could just keep doing what we've been doing. But in Matthew, it doesn't seem that the sheep knew they were sheep. *Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'* (Matthew 25:37-39) They appear to have done what they could, shared what they had, did what they thought right, and it turned out that that was what it took to end up at God's right hand. They don't know what they did for Jesus and Jesus says, *Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'* (Matthew 25:40)

Because we aren't sheep. The trouble about talking about God, about the divine, is that we have no experience of what we're talking about. So we use metaphors, to say that God is like something else. God is like a shepherd with sheep or a prince like David with his subjects. We like the sound of the world that Ezekiel describes, but it is only a metaphor. We're not sheep, because we can care for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the imprisoned. We have the gifts and the capability of working with God. Or not. It's our call. But our decision matters, because what God is asking us to do is well within our capabilities.

God wants us to use the gifts we have been given to work toward the Kingdom we are longing for. It's not super complicated. We work with what we have for those around us who could use some help. It's stewardship. In stewardship, we foster the gifts that we're given for justice, for the poor, hungry, those in prison. We build up an organization that not only does the Kingdom's work, but also points back to the Good Shepherd who provides all the gifts we need.

Of course we're going to celebrate stewardship. We may be precious sheep who are loved and tended for. But we are so much more than sheep. We have been invited by God to work on the kingdom. And that work consists of sharing what we have, what we know, with those around us. Sure, we will share through Outreach and other activities. In addition to that, we'll share the life changing truth that we are so loved that not only are we given all we need for life, our lives

themselves have been given meaning because they have been given important work by the one who loves us so ardently.

Yes, we will take the financial pledges of support gathered this Fall and ask the Finance Committee to put together a budget for us to review at Annual Meeting in January. That alone is cause for celebration. The pledges will fall short of what we wanted. And perhaps they should. There is always more work we can do, more people who hunger and thirst for justice and for the kingdom where none are scattered or lost. Because the Kingdom doesn't arrive when we get our collective act together. It is not up to us when the Kingdom arrives. That is up to God. But we are invited to work towards it to the best of our abilities. Last week, at the end of my sermon about a faithful response to the mass shooting at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, I said, "Amen." And Jocelyn replied, "All Done." She was a brilliant steward of her gifts and talents. She made a lot of us feel loved. She did her work for the Kingdom.

Celebrating Stewardship means celebrating that we are not sheep, that we have a collegiality with God.¹ Celebrating stewardship means not just an abundance of things and activities laid out on a somewhat wobbly table with the perfect tablecloth from the 1950s. It means that we are committed to raising our voices, raising our money, raising the Kingdom that we long for into the middle of this world which continues to push with flank and shoulder, butting the weak with its horns. (Ezekiel 34:21). The kingdom we long for is not for us to bring forth. God will bring it forth when it is time. But not only can we work towards it, we are invited to work towards it, with simple stewardship, by sharing the gifts we have been given. And we have been given so many. All Done.

¹ Karyn L. Wiseman, "Proper 29 (Reign of Christ), Homiletical Perspective, Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 317.