

Sermon Text for November 22, 2020

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Ezekiel 34:11-16, Matthew 25:31-46 *“Christ is King”*

This Sunday we find ourselves with a bit of an embarrassment of choices in deciding on what topic for the day we ought to preach. This Sunday is the Sunday that during the Sunday School hour we would normally have a brunch with Fellowship Hall filled with people and the youth would be serving us a delicious meal. We would be entertained in the hall with a program, and then we would honor our 50 year members by giving a shout out to them. We have 37 people within our congregation who have been members of this church since at least 1970. The person who has been a member of this church for the longest is Elinore Rudy and she has been a member of First Presbyterian since 1940, someone do the math, how many years is that? She has been a member of First Presbyterian for 80 years. Let's give all of our 50+ year members a standing ovation and thank them for their service, for their dedication, for their unrelenting loyalty. It takes a lot to stay with a church through all that this church has been through and not to go looking for another church to side with. Thank you for staying with us and for being faithful.

This weekend is also Thanksgiving weekend, although it is a very different Thanksgiving than many of us have ever experienced. Many of us have households that are not full with our family as we are used to. The hymns we have chosen for this Sunday are Thanksgiving hymns and so we could choose, as we have done in the past, to preach on giving thanks just as much as we can choose to focus on the faithfulness of God and of you over all these years. There is are so many topics we could sift through. We could also address the pandemic, I haven't really tackled that yet head on in my sermons, although I've repeatedly referred to it in my enews mailings. How is God at work during this time in the life of the church, in the life of the nation, in the life of your family. How is the pandemic affecting your faith and your understanding of God as a God who is in control and in charge.

But this week we are going to focus on that which the Christian calendar year provides us. We are in a season of the lectionary in our sermon series, and the lectionary season gives us this Sunday as the Sunday that we proclaim that Christ is King. This is called Christ the King Sunday. Next week Advent begins and every year the Sunday before Advent, is, well, Christ the King Sunday, so that is today. So today we have two Scriptures which give us an understanding of what it is that we mean when we say that Christ is king. The imagery is varied. In Ezekiel we

find a king who is a shepherd, much like David was a shepherd boy before he was King, much like Moses was a shepherd before he led the people of Israel out of Egypt. In the New Testament reading for today we have an image of the Jesus as the King who judges, the King who separates the sheep from the goats, while at the same time is incredibly vulnerable to the point of being in a position where we are able to provide some of the very basic necessities of life to him without even knowing it. Let's read.

READ

If I were to ask you what is your favorite Psalm I bet many of you, if not most of you, would identify Psalm 23 as one of your favorites. Many of you can recite it by heart, all I have to say is: The Lord is my shepherd, and then you can complete the rest of that Psalm. The Lord is my shepherd. Do we really think about what we are saying and what we mean when we call the Lord, our God, our shepherd? This is the imagery that we find in this Scripture here in Ezekiel.

But God is a shepherd, we read, who will go out and search for his sheep, vs.11, because they are scattered across the land. We know that Ezekiel was written in a time when Israel was in captivity, in exile, and was scattered from Babylon, the Jerusalem, to Egypt and beyond. God is saying that even though you are now scattered, even though we are not in our own land, I will gather you together. I will be the shepherd who gathers you together. The image of God as a shepherd and as the king of kings is not foreign in the Bible. If you look at Jeremiah 10:10 we read: But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. If you read also in Psalm 95:3 you also see the imagery of God as the King who is above all the other gods.

So this image that we have in Ezekiel of God as a shepherd who gathers his people is not inconsistent and works side by side with the image that we have of God as king who rules over his people. Ezekiel is speaking to a people who are completely disoriented and out of their comfort zone. As we have been reading in our 100 day challenge about the words of Ezekiel to a people who feel as if all that they once knew has been taken from them, I can't help but make somewhat of a parallel to the situation in which we find ourselves and in which many of us are feeling.

Here we find ourselves in a very limited capacity worshipping together, and the words of Ezekiel tell us that one day we will be gathered once again in this place, in this sanctuary, a place of refuge and comfort and safety. Our God will be the shepherd who will gather the scattered sheep and bring them back. The very beginning of these verses that we read we see that it is God who is addressing the people: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

On this Christ the King Sunday we can say with confidence that the God that we serve is a king who is a good shepherd. Interestingly enough in the verses before this in Ezekiel God talks about the shepherds who were not good, those he had put in charge of his bride, the church, or the temple. He says the pastors, the religious leaders of the day in vs.3 you do not feed the sheep. You don't strengthen the weak, you don't heal the sick, you haven't bound up the injured or brought back those who have strayed. Because those whom God has put in charge have only looked after their own interests and their own desires, God himself is going to have to step in and intervene. Which is why he says: I will rescue them.

This shepherd, this king, has to come and intervene on our behalf. But does the king have to become a sheep himself? Now that would be more than what is called for, right? He can just keep sending people to make sure that his desires and his actions are carried out, right? Look at Isaiah 53:7 where we read about this king, this shepherd, who is also a suffering servant. We read: he was oppressed, he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. Are we saying that the king, the shepherd is then going to become one of the sheep, one of us?

We are going to transition to the New Testament now, our Matthew reading as we have established that God is the king, God is the good shepherd who gathers us from near and far, but surely we can't say that God is that sheep that is led to the slaughter, can we? Our lectionary text for this Christ the King Sunday comes from Matthew 25 as we continue along in this chapter. A few weeks ago we read from Matthew 25 and the parable of the talents in the beginning of this chapter. Now we finish out this chapter with the parable of the sheep and the goats. Turn there now.

The description that we find in the beginning of this parable is this: When the son of man comes in his glory...then the king will judge. Jesus is the one who comes back in glory as the king who judges. That is clear. Let us not get too carried away with a limp Jesus who just turns over and allows himself to be tossed around without any indication of one who is in charge. No, Jesus is King, Jesus will come again and judge the living and the dead. Jesus is the king who will separate and there will be a separation. We don't in Scripture have the depiction that everything is going to be fine for everyone and it doesn't really matter what you do because Jesus loves you. Yes, Jesus loves you, but Jesus is also the righteous judge. Let's not forget that.

There are a multiplicity of Scriptures that describe Jesus as the king and especially in Matthew. Matthew 1:1 he is called son of David, so obviously the heir to the throne. Again he

is called that in Matthew 1:20 and then again in Matthew 2:2 he is called the king of the Jews. Like a bookend to his life we find him called in Matthew 27 before the governor are you the king of the Jews. The same title he is given by the Roman guards as they mock him and put a crown of thorns on his head. When he is crucified the inscription reads King of the Jews. This all is in Matthew 27 and then as he is on the cross the religious leaders, the shepherds who were making themselves fat, mock him and say if he is the King of Israel let him save himself.

This past Sunday, last week, I had given the junior high kids an assignment to come back and since this might be one of the first times in their life to think about their faith as their own and not what their parents think, to tell me who God is to them. Here are some answers: God is always there, God is someone whom I can look up to and follow his example, God is always one step ahead of us and is preparing good things for us, God is someone who always loves us, God is someone like a counselor who points us in the right direction. These are 6th, 7th, 8th graders. They expressed it in their own words, it was moving, but I had my mask on so they couldn't see that I was getting a bit teary eyed, so that's good. You can't let middle school kids see your weaknesses.

Today we are describing God as king, God as a shepherd, Jesus himself says in John 10 twice that he is the good shepherd, we even ventured to ask can we see him as a vulnerable sheep. No way, right? Look at vs.35 where we find this king speaking, where we find Jesus speaking, and he says: I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a foreigner, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison. Not someone like me, not your neighbor, but me, Jesus, the king of kings became so vulnerable that I allowed you to serve me...and did you? We had no idea it was you Jesus. Just like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, weren't our hearts burning within us when we were confronted by that person who stopped by our food bank last week. I had no idea that was Jesus, how could I, not my fault.

This past Friday we had over a dozen clients stop in over a 2 hour period picking up their Thanksgiving meal. We have someone who helps on Friday and she isn't officially a member yet because we had a class that was one meeting away from becoming members and then this happened. But you should hear her interact with the clients. She calls them by name, she gives them the benefit of the doubt, she treats each one as if they were Jesus himself. I get a front row seat because the food bank is now across the hall from me.

Some of us during this Covid crazy time think we have a free pass to act crazy, to do things and say things that we wouldn't normally do and say, but hey, since these are such trying times I get a pass, right? No, we don't get a pass. Jesus is our King and he reigns over us and

our lives ought to reflect his Lordship. Jesus is our Shepherd who goes out and seeks the one and leaves the 99. Jesus is the one who asks Peter, do you love, and then says tend my sheep. Our task during this time, especially during this time when others are hurting so much, is to serve the king. The king reigns and rules without our help, but covets our partnership, our relationship with him. Foster that relationship and you will discover the face of God in the most unusual and exciting places. Amen.