

Today's second reading comes from the book of Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 11 through 16 and 20 through 24. Listen for God's word to you this day:

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ I will feed them with 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. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶ 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. ²¹ Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²² I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

²³ I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

This is the word of God for the people of God....thanks be to God.

The Israelites are in a land of exile, seeking any sort of reassurance that God is with them. We may not be in the same form of exile but we have been in a season of exile, we're still in a season of exile. And, it is a strange and lonely place. Whether we feel like we're in exile now or at some other time in our lives the feelings are similar. It is a feeling of being disconnected from all that is comfortable and known, it is where we feel like we're in the bottom of a pit trying to climb to the top with nothing but our strength to help us. It is the ultimate feeling of being the underdog. Of having everyone betting against you, or even worse, just dismissing you all together.

I would say we have all felt in some form of exile over this year. Exile in relationships, exile from normalcy, mentally in exile, for most of us I would imagine there has been a moment or two of feeling down and out. Feeling as though we're never going to reach the promised land, or return to the home land, what is familiar and known.

Today as we find ourselves in a place of exile, we also come together to celebrate Christ the King, the reign of Christ above all else. From a place of exile we are longing for a king, we find ourselves in need of rescue, a reminder of Christ as we journey through this season.

Jesus and God are often described in scripture as both shepherd and King. Two images that stand in many ways in stark contrast to one another, one with much political and social power, the other with much grit and real-world experience. One down to earth quite literally and one lofty, often seen as withdrawn or above. But these images when used in relation to Christ the King do not speak of detachment and judgement that wields power and authority against the good works of humans, but is a Kingship of guiding and re-directing, like that of a shepherd.

When Jesus was murdered he was mocked as King of the Jews because it was clear his power was not that of political and social authority. Those with all the political and socio-religious power were the very ones threatened by this underdog King, a king that looked so radically different from their form of leadership that they wanted him dead, and so it was, that he was murdered. King of the Jews was an insult, but in the centuries since Christians have held it as an example of his authority and power at the behest of the Creator, God.

This King doesn't reign the way we would expect. As in the Ezekiel text, God time and time again comes back to the people, gently but firmly reminding them that they can do better: that they should care for the lean sheep in their midst, not butt up to them with their horns, not trample on them to reach the shepherd first. They should not cause pain and suffering, wielding their power. God says: 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.

God's destruction is one that sets all things right, so that all of the sheep are in the fold, all of the sheep experience in equal proportion, what God has created for each to experience. Doesn't it seem strange that the very thing that God uses as punishment, or as a way of calming selfish ambition is justice?

Unfortunately, I think it's not that surprising if we stop to think about the ways the world glorifies power and success and the way God, through all of creation, has sought to turn that on its head.

When we find ourselves feeling like we've been left in exile, left to struggle it out for ourselves, we end up living in fear focusing on all the ways we can outdo or one up the world

around us whether that's people, animals, land, water, you name it we're trying to conquer it and it's because we keep missing what God is trying to tell us again and again.

Fear does not win. When we are faced with fear God comes to us and like a shepherd directs us in a new way, encouraging us to release the fear and any thought of scarcity. There is an abundance with God that does not require competition or elimination. God doesn't love a set number of people, or a certain type of being, and when we spew judgement or righteousness in the name of God that is merely our fear replacing God's love.

Scholar and theologian Maryann McKibben Dana says this of this text: "these texts portray a God whose primary interest is righteousness, not wrath. 'Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, 'but not today.' God means business, and God will not let injustice go unanswered—but God is not wantonly malicious."¹

God is righteous but God is not vengeful. As Dana says there is judgement, but it is not without a reminder of another way of living. God wants creation to work in harmony, not to be at odds so God reminds the reader that it is the vulnerable in the flock who need protected, not the bullies, not the ones who butt their way through the herd to be the first through to the food, not the ones who are fatted up, but the ones who have struggled and are struggling. It is the job of the shepherd, the king, who acts on behalf of God, the deity, to care for the most vulnerable, to not allow the bullies to overpower and ultimately kill those who aren't as big or strong. Again, fear does not win, and those actions of the fatted sheep are the result of fear.

You all there is nothing timelier to us than this. As leaders, as Christians who place our faith in a King that rules with love, concern, compassion, for the most vulnerable, who brings

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 4, Maryann McKibben Dana (318)

into the flock those who have been pushed out, we are the ones who must show those same things in return to the world. That is the only way they will know we are Christians. That is the only way they will know that when we say Christ reigns and is King of all that it actually has meaning for how we live our lives and how we respond to the land of exile in which we find ourselves.

If we are stuck in a mindset of fear, if all we see before us is the land of exile we will never experience the fullness of Christ as King. In the Confession of 1967 we get some profound language around how we as the church are to respond to Christ's kingship and our call as Christ's hands and feet in the world today. It says this:

"Biblical visions and images of the rule of Christ, such as a heavenly city, a father's house, a new heaven and earth, a marriage feast, and an unending day culminate in the image of the kingdom. The kingdom represents the triumph of God over all that resists [God's] will and disrupts [God's] creation. Already God's reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in people and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption.

With an urgency born of this hope, the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God."²

Things are not going the way we want them to right now. This pandemic is causing fear to rise within us in ways that have some of us lashing out, and others sticking their head in the sand.

² PCUSA Book of Confessions, The Confession of 1967.

When we are in exile, fear has a tendency to take over and we start clamoring for something we can trust. Like the fatted sheep continuing to “push with flank and shoulder, and butt at all the weak animals with [their] horns.” We need something we can trust, something we can hold onto that will bring us through to the end. And yet, even as we are desperately seek that thing, we end up missing it, we end up missing the presence of God, the one thing we can trust with upmost confidence. Being consumed by our circumstances, desperate to control and redirect shields from us the opportunity for the steadfast hope that lives within the body of Christ to show its reign. To be brought to fruition through us. We miss the opportunity to trust in all that God has promised to us throughout history.

As we head into this week of Thanksgiving in the US let us not be led by fear but let us be most grateful for a God who comes back to us time and time again, who guides us whether we are the ones being pushed around or the ones doing the pushing, for a God who longs for us to all receive God’s righteousness equally and without domination or fear. May we be so grateful for God’s continued gift of Christ within us that our lives are marked daily by the expression of that gratitude and trust in the ways we show compassion, love, and mercy to the world even when we are in exile from all that is familiar.

May it be so. Amen.