

“Life with the Shepherd King”

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Scriptures: Ezekiel 34:11-20; Psalm 95; 1 Cor 15:20-28; Matthew 25:31-46

It will begin soon. The television ads. The long spots on talk radio and cable news. The billboards. The merch. I am even told that the policy debates have already started happening. The cry will come as surely as the sunrise: “This is the most important election in our nation’s history.” We are about to embark, in the United States, on the sprint section of the latest Presidential election cycle. A perhaps unforeseen downside of getting to choose one’s leaders is having to listen to those leaders campaign for our votes. We’ve all seen the depths to which this effort can drive a person. But if that claim is to be believed, if the future really hangs on the outcome of a particular race, certainly all the effort, all the compromise of standards of decency and morality for the sake of political expediency is surely justified, isn’t it? If we are not careful, this is where we can get a bit too invested in the kingdoms that happen to run our world.

And really, we are not that different from those who have come before us. Yes, even in God’s people throughout history, we see that there is a hyper-focus on the temporal and not enough focus on things that are eternal. We think of course of the people of Israel’s demand for a king from the prophet Samuel and the litany of rivalries and schemes that fill up the pages of the books of Kings and Chronicles. It all starts to sound pretty familiar if we listen closely enough. It makes you wonder if part of the serpent's pitch to Eve was that her vote to take the fruit for the forbidden tree was the most important decision of her lifetime.

That tyranny of the immediate - the idea that the current state of politics, our situation, our job, our finances, the moment in which we find ourselves, robs us of the broader perspective of the actual way of things, the eternal, divine perspective of things, the way of viewing the world that holds not us as individuals, not one people group, not one nation at its center, but the Creator of the Universe.

Thankfully, we have a great tool to re-orient ourselves around this new perspective - the liturgical calendar. For the Christian, life does not revolve around the election cycle, the school calendar or even our own Google calendar, but the reality of the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ. The liturgical calendar helps us grow more and more aware of that reality by centering how we keep time in the story of Jesus. As we look forward to next week and the beginning of the liturgical year, a time of waiting and longing for the coming of Jesus, today we sit at the liturgical year's conclusion, the exclamation point at the end of what the calendar has to say, which is this: Jesus is king. We live in his New Creation Kingdom. And our lives will be fuller, richer, and better the sooner we realize this and get on board with the work he has given us to do.

Today we recognize, celebrate, and worship Christ the King. And though the world has seen its fair share of unjust rulers, Jesus on the throne is the cosmos as it should be.

But what does it mean for Jesus to be king? We will spend eternity learning the full answer to that question, but our readings for today give us a glimpse into what kind of king Jesus is, what that means for the future, and what that requires of us.

Let's first turn to Ezekiel. This is a prophet that doesn't have much happy news to share. Ezekiel's message is a word of judgment against Israel and the nations for unfaithfulness to God. The world has a way of putting things that are not God on the throne, and the voice of the prophets reminds us how much of a backwards thing that is, and the death and destruction that are its end. This chapter, Ezekiel 34, is a particularly pointed critique of those who were tasked with the spiritual leadership of Israel, who had used their position to take advantage of others and lift up themselves. God has no time for those kinds of leaders and indeed, through the prophet, promises to rescue his people from their leadership. If you want to know what God thinks about leaders who lead their people astray for their own benefit, read Ezekiel 34. But the section we read today is a bit of a respite from that biting critique - it is a contrast between the unfaithful shepherds of Israel and God's promise to come and be the Good and Faithful Shepherd to his people. If we want to know what God's reign is like, what it means for God to be king, and how he will act as king, this passage shows us.

Commentator Christopher Wright has marked three attributes of the Good King marked out in this passage. He writes that the reign of the Good Shepherd "would be marked by three things: ingathering (11–13a); tending and feeding (13b–16) and justice (17–22)."¹

¹ Wright, Christopher. *The Message of Ezekiel* (ch 34)

First, we have ingathering, “For thus says the Lord God; Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land.”²

Here the prophet is writing about the scattered people of Israel, promising that they would be returned to the places from which they had been driven out. God himself would go and bring them home. Jesus would later say that he would leave the ninety-nine sheep to go get the one who was lost. That’s what good shepherds do. They get their sheep. The Good Shepherd as the king means that those who are lost are sought out, and those who have been taken away are brought back.

The Good King Jesus then cares for those whom he brings home: “And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. 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, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.”³

² Ezek 34:11-13a

³ Ezek 34:13b-16

Part of the reason we get caught up with bad shepherds as kings is because we think that the food they are giving us is meeting our needs, when in reality it is the very thing that is destroying our lives. The fruit of idolatry can seemingly satisfy for a while, but it is only the Good Shepherd, the one who created us, who knows what it is that we truly need. It is only the one who made our bodies who knows how to truly heal them. Other kings may boast in whom they have killed and conquered, but the true King is known by whom he feeds and whom he heals.

To have the Good Shepherd as our king also means that he will work justice among his sheep. "As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet? Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep."⁴

To be truly healthy and whole, to be fed and healed as one of the sheep of the Good Shepherd, means to address the ways in which we have been infected by false kings and shepherds and the sin that we visit upon others. The good pasture and clean water that the Good Shepherd gives to the sheep can be misused by those sheep and ruined for others. But in the flock of Shepherd King, that sort of thing will not stand, for he is a king who is just.

⁴ Ezek 34:17-20

So if this threefold description of ingathering, feeding, and justice is a description of what our good king is like, what then does that say about the future, the result of his reign? We may know who is in the driver seat, but where are we going? What is the aim of the kingdom of God?

The answer in short, is the renewal of all creation from the powers of sin and death. Paul says it like this in our New Testament reading for the day: "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."⁵ I don't know if we often take the time to fully appreciate the cosmic nature of that statement. To the same degree that the sin of our first parents and our own sin brings death and destruction to the world, so is life brought back into the picture in Christ. The Shepherd King has embarked on a mission of rescue and renewal, accomplishing it through his own death and resurrection. It is a task only one could accomplish, and thank goodness it is he who is on the throne.

That is the best story that could ever be told. The king who is about bringing in the lost, feeding the hungry and healing the wounded, the king who is devoted to justice has made and is making the world whole again. The cosmos is put back together! Talk about a reason to give thanks!

But what does this mean for you, for me? What are the requirements of living under the reign of the Shepherd King? Do we just bump along until our time on this world

⁵ 1 Cor 15:21-22

is over, knowing God has it all covered? King Jesus seems to have more expectations than that. Our Gospel reading for today describes a vision of the final judgment, where Jesus separates the sheep from the goats based on how they treated those whom he calls the least of his brothers and sisters. Feeding, clothing, caring for the sick. You will notice that the sorts of things that Jesus requires are the same sorts of things the Good Shepherd does in the passage from Ezekiel. He indeed uses the same imagery of separating sheep from goats. The question we have to answer for ourselves is whether or not we will be like the Good Shepherd, restoring, and seeking God's justice, or whether we assume that is someone else's problem.

We can say how the first Christians and countless Christians through the centuries have responded to that question. Taking the way of Matthew 25 that Jesus prescribed for among his followers, their imitation spilled over into the world through things like the rescuing of abandoned children, the creation of hospitals, all the way to the Civil Rights movement in the United States – little imitators of the Good Shepherd, living Kingdom lives, re-making the world.

So what is required of those who would be called a part of the Kingdom of God? What does it mean to live up to the standards of Matthew 25? I came across a phrase recently that I think can help us begin to answer that question. I was listening to an interview with the author David Brooks, who offered a summary of a concept he got from the philosopher Iris Murdoch. Brooks argues that Murdoch's idea of practicing a "just and loving attention" to those around us is a crucial starting point for a healthy society.⁶

⁶<https://www.theringer.com/2023/11/21/23971820/david-brooks-how-to-know-a-person-the-art-of-seeing-others-deeply-and-being-deeply-seen>

A just and loving attention feeds those who are hungry. A just and loving attention, cares for those who are sick. A just and loving attention is what the Good Shepherd King has offered to us, for he is the one who is truly just and loving.

As Christians, we bear the name of our king. And we make the audacious claim that he is not only our king, but king of the entire universe and that his kingship is radically good news for all of his creatures. He offers us and the world the care of the Good Shepherd, the just and loving attention only he can give. When we practice the same, in our imperfect and incomplete ways, we bring honor to his name. We accept the offer to partner with him in his work of renewing the world.

The story is already written. God is making all things new. Indeed, he has done so in Jesus. If we let him, he can make our lives little outposts of that continuing work in the world. Outside of that way lie destruction and death, but with the Good Shepherd King lies the way of overflowing life. The king is on his throne. Oh come let us adore him.