

Title: “Losing Weight While We Wait”

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Ezekiel 34:20

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Service Readings: Ezk 34:11-16, 20-24; 1 Cor. 15:20-28; Matt 25:31-46

Ezekiel warns us that the Good Shepherd will separate the fat sheep from the thin. It is a good time to take stock while we wait for the return of Jesus to introspect where we might be fat from power and oppression in our own lives and then thin down to serve and love others.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

How often have you dropped into the middle of a tv series or movie and experienced just a small portion of it? Maybe you don't even watch a single act but just a portion of one, and you are then left with questions concerning the broader context, the direction, and even the plot. What you saw made sense by itself, but you just know that there is more to the story. And you also know that if you understood the greater context, if you knew more of the plot, what you saw would be enriched and you would be able to appreciate it even more. This is how I feel about the passage that we read from Ezekiel this morning. Not only did we read only a small portion, it wasn't even a cohesive portion! Several verses were eliminated! So, before we begin, I think that it is important to fill in some of these details.

God's chosen people have long split into two different kingdoms: the north and the south. The north has been swallowed up by the surrounding nations and the south is facing the same threat. They have been captured by the Babylonians and are in exile. Their beloved Jerusalem has been destroyed, and this is where our passage picks up. Just after news of the city's destruction, the prophet warns its leaders. Now, you would think that they would care for their own people, their flock, especially while they all shared in the experience of the exile. But they seem to be doing something altogether different. Instead of caring for their flock, they are taking advantage of them! These leaders are gaining wealth and experiencing improved life at the expense of those that God has entrusted to them. Is it no wonder, then that Ezekiel speaks these words of warning and judgement to them? Through him God sends these leaders a message: repent or be judged. And then the message turns to the sheep, the ones who are subjected to this extra weight of suffering. God promises to seek them out, to find and gather them together. He promises to be their shepherd so that they will no longer be victim to the exploits of these false ones. He says:

¹¹“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹²As 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. ¹³And 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 ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴I 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. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD.

What a beautiful imagery that the prophet gives us. A shepherd who will seek out his sheep, gather them under his fold, and fulfill their every need. But then the message seems to change as he talks about separating the fat and thin sheep. Starting in verse 20:

²⁰ “Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, ²² I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep.

Notice how he is not separating the goats from the sheep, or is not separating the sheep from the wolves. He is separating the *fat* sheep from the *lean* sheep. He is separating the flock between those who say they love and follow God and those who *actually* do! Now, lest we fall into the common trap of believing that we need to do something to ensure that we are the lean sheep, let me lay that down in the pasture right now. The suffering of our master shepherd, the one who became the perfect sheep, the one who became the perfect sacrifice, the one who laid down his life for his sheep has done it all. It is through his bloody sacrifice that he becomes our great shepherd and we become his sheep. He did it all for us, and he continues to serve us, just as a shepherd serves his sheep each and every day.

With all this background we can begin to understand the greater context; we can understand why God sent this message to his people in that place and at that time. And it is easily understood why God made this promise to them. And we can draw a straight and clear line between this message and promise from Ezekiel and the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our savior. And furthermore, we can easily extend this line into the vision of John that he recorded in his book of revelation. We can understand how God can promise to wipe away every tear from every eye.

But what might not be quite so obvious is our personal inclusion in this story line. For God's story seems so grand, so unimaginably overwhelming that it is difficult, for me at least, to feel any personal attachment to it. We are taught that through Baptism we dwell in Jesus and he dwells in us and that makes us *intimately* participatory in it. You are, and I am as much part of God's story as Adam and Noah and Ruth and everyone else that we read about in Scripture. We *are* who Jesus died for. We *are* the sheep that God promises through the prophet Ezekiel to seek, gather, and protect. Every Christian is. We can read this passage, and any other, and see that the actions of God, through the prophets, and through the ultimate prophet, Jesus, are done intentionally for our behalf. We are not accidents or inadvertent recipients of God's mercy and Jesus' sacrifice but are the *reason for it!* We are not just witnesses to this line that is drawn from the garden to eternity, we are the *reason* for this line! We are the *reason* for every action of God. And so when we talk about Jesus becoming our shepherd we mean it in the ultimate fullness of the title. He will meet every need, care for every soul, and dry every tear.

But his message also includes a message of warning. It is a warning made in love, but a warning, nonetheless. You see, what Ezekiel reminds us this morning is nothing less than this: we live in a world where we are taken advantage of; a world where we are exploited not just by the people of the world, but also by those who claim to follow God. Read the news and you cannot help but find

examples of this. There are fat sheep all across the world. But lest we believe that we are, and will always be the *thin* sheep, he reminds us that we should weigh *ourselves*... for it is quite possible that we have gained a bit of weight over these years of following Christ. Maybe we have become those who push with side and shoulder in judgement of others. Maybe we have become people who say that we follow Jesus, who say that we are thin, but our actions seem to show something altogether different.

And so this morning it seems like a perfect time to remind ourselves of who we are, and to potentially weigh ourselves to determine if we are living the pattern that Jesus gave us, a pattern of self-sacrifice and love, of loving God and loving our neighbor above ourselves, for this is the only way that we remain thin. And, personally, since Thanksgiving has so recently passed, and Christmas is just around the corner, there is no better time than to reflect on how we respond to the work of our great shepherd and connect that to the image of weight. For, if you are like me, I have gained several pounds that I know I need to lose! And I am not going to wait until the new year, but will renew my spiritual exercise today. I will turn to my shepherd, repent and seek forgiveness. And through this I will lose this weight. And Jesus will remind me that I am a thin sheep and that he is my shepherd. And he will remind me that I am such an important part of God's story. And I am confident that you will be reminded of the same. And so I end with this simple question: are you ready to lose some weight?

Please pray with me.

You are the shepherd and we are the sheep and you have promised to gather us together and lead us. We pray that we will always recognize when we have sinned and turned from you, and we pray that you will always seek us out and return us to your fold.

Amen.