Ezekiel 34:11-24

"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

"As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

"Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

John 10:22-31

Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. The religious elite among the Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Again the religious elite picked up stones to stone him.
In the Strong Hands of the Shepherd

Last Sunday, our lectionary reading from John 21 was about the commission Jesus gave to Peter to feed his sheep. This Sunday, our lectionary reading is from John 10 where Jesus, the Good Shepherd, fends off the religious elite who circle around him like wolves. Today I would like to invite you to wade more deeply into that scene, for as we do so together, I think it will become clearer to us what the passage is about, what it has to do with us, and what we can take home from it.

So let me try to set the scene. It is winter, and Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Festival of Dedication, sometimes called the Festival of Lights, but which we know by its Hebrew name, Hanukkah. Hanukkah commemorates the reclaiming of Jerusalem through the heroism of the Maccabees who revolted against the Seleucid Empire. It celebrates the rededication of the Temple in 164 BCE after its desecration by a Hellenistic ruler named Antiochus IV who erected there an image of Zeus.

So what does that have to do with anything? Mention of the Festival of Lights continues the prominent contrast in John’s Gospel between darkness and light. In the third verse of John’s Gospel, Jesus is called the “light that shines in the darkness,” the light that darkness has not overcome. And here in the darkening days of winter, the one who is called the Light of the World happens to be at the Temple during the Festival of Lights, just after he has—what? After he restored sight to a blind man.

But it gets dark early in the winter, and Jesus finds himself surrounded by the Jewish elite. They encircle him menacingly the way wolves circle their prey. They demand that Jesus come out with it: is he or is he not the Messiah, God’s specially anointed one?

Our English translation puts it rather sweetly, “how long will you keep us in suspense,” but what is literally being asked in the Greek is, “how long will you take away our life?” Now there’s irony for you, because Jesus came to give us life and life eternal, not to take life away. But, in fact, their question wasn’t a polite inquiry, it was a mean-spirited interrogation, and what they expressed toward Jesus was not suspenseful wonder but annoyance, irritation and even open hostility. And so I would render it this way: “look, you’re killing us already. Just come out with it: are you or are you not the Messiah?”

Jesus’ response, of course, only infuriates them more, and, in fact, it leads them to try to stone him, and we might ask why. What Jesus says is that he has told them, only they wouldn’t believe.

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1 This interpretation is rooted in large part in the Evangelist’s use of the verb kukloō (encircle, surround), which occurs only three other times the NT, twice of aggressive action (surrounding in order to attack: Luke 21:20; Heb. 11:30;) and once of a defensive one (surrounding someone who has been attacked in order to rescue him: Acts 14:20). The image of circling wolves is very much in keeping with the chapter’s image of a shepherd who protects the sheep of his flock from being seized (harpadein) (10:12, 10:28, 10:29; cf. 6:15).

2 On the structural level, the fourth Evangelist uses four Jewish feasts and festivals (Sabbath, Passover, Tabernacles, Dedication) to organize his Gospel materials, and to give primacy to Jesus. Each Jewish festival becomes the background from which Jesus emerges in the foreground.

3 Now any time you read the word believe in the Gospels, it’s a good idea to think not so much in terms of propositions and facts, but in terms of trust, which has less to do with statements and data, and more to do with persons and relationships. Jesus is saying that although he “told” them through his works that he is the Messiah, they still wouldn’t place their trust in him.
Now in John’s Gospel neither Jesus’ words nor his works ever lead to full recognition of who Jesus is. They do not of themselves lead to belief or trust. That’s because for John, faith in Jesus never really arises from an analysis of empirical data. Trust in Jesus in John’s Gospel is never reducible to physical evidence or even trustworthy testimony because trust in Jesus finally only comes about through the initiative of God. This is what Jesus begins to tell them when he adds enigmatically, “you don’t trust because you aren’t my sheep.”

But let’s pause for a minute. You all know that according to John, Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd (10:11). But what you also need to know is that Jesus’ assertion that he is the Good Shepherd is within a hair length of the acknowledgment that he regards himself as the Messiah or the anointed one. For in the Old Testament, the shepherd is a frequent symbol for the anointed Davidic king as we saw in our reading from Ezekiel (Ezek. 34:23).

By calling himself the Good Shepherd, Jesus implicitly contrasts himself with all the bad shepherds of Israel’s history, all its false kings, its false religious elite, all those who have led the people astray or have failed to properly feed and protect them.

Now maybe some of you felt Jesus’ comment, “you do not trust me because you are not my sheep,” was a little edgy. Maybe you even wondered why Jesus seemed to be barring his conversation partners from his own green pastures. But I think what is going on here instead is that Jesus is simply calling a spade a spade. It is not that Jesus’ heart does not also long for them—indeed, it breaks for them (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34). It’s that they are not the sheep of his flock. In fact, they are not sheep at all. They are wolves who want to tear him apart.

For Jesus, the answer to the question who are or are not among Jesus’ flock (10:14) is rooted in the initiative of the Father who has given those sheep to him. In the words of Jesus, “all that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (6:37). And again; “no one comes to me unless the Father who sent me draws him (or her), and I will raise (them) up” (6:44). Because the religious elite are not Jesus’ sheep, they neither hearken to Jesus’ voice nor follow him as he seeks to care for, feed and protect them.

Although we citizens of the 21st century are very reluctant to think of ourselves as sheep, it is as the sheep of Jesus’ flock that we discover the source of our meaning and purpose. It is as the sheep of his flock that Jesus gives us eternal life. Now John uses a present tense of the verb “give” here, a tense that always has a continuing force in the original Greek, and which therefore could be translated, “I give them eternal life” or “I am giving them eternal life” or even, “I continue to give them eternal life.”

I emphasize that because this is among the boldest claims of our Christian faith. Jesus doesn’t simply promise us eternal life in some pie-in-the-sky-time after we have been dead and buried. He gives us eternal life now. As theologian Edward Dowey once put it, “life eternal is the present reality of the eternal. It is not to be thought of first as a future extension of life, but a different quality of life in which, present and future, God’s love is the dominant and victorious feature.”

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4 A Commentary on The Confession of 1967 and An Introduction to The Book of Confessions, by Edward A. Dowey, Jr. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press: 1968), p. 95. Dowey goes on to cite 1 John 4:16 and John 17:3: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him... This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.”
If we are the sheep of his pasture, Jesus gives us eternal life right now and keeps on giving it to us. Are you ready right now for eternal life? Do you trust Jesus enough to claim that gift even on this cloudy and rainy day? Are you willing to affirm Jesus’ shepherding relationship with you that is the foundation of this present gift?

That, by the way, provides a nice segue way with our lectionary psalm for the day, Psalm 23. The translation we all know and love begins “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” But in fact, because the Hebrew uses a participle that carries the verbal idea of shepherding, not a noun meaning shepherd, an alternative translation might begin, “YHWH is shepherding me. I don’t want for anything.”

Eternal life, the fullness of life in the present, is a continuing gift, and it is realized precisely in the continuing shepherding relationship that we enjoy under the care, feeding and leading of the Good Shepherd whose voice we recognize and who calls us each by name.

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus guarantees that no one shall ever snatch his sheep out of his hand. And he backs up that guarantee by saying that his Father, who gave him that flock, has the biggest hands of all. What Jesus affirms, in other words, is that there is a unity of power and operation between the Father and the Son, and the way he sums that up is by saying, “The Father and I are one.”

When I was growing up, I idolized my oldest brother Addison. He was a good eleven years older than me, and was a pretty accomplished athlete. One of the things I remember he used to do even after I weighed well more than 100 lbs was to hold me up in the air over his head with one hand. (I also remember that I would run and fetch his shot put and hammer for him. I learned that I had to dig them out of our neighbor’s yard pretty quickly because if somebody came out yelling about the huge holes in their lawn, I was pretty much on my own.)

Like any kid, I got into occasional scuffles with my friends. We had to sort out between us, as all boys must, who among us was the toughest, and who we might call upon in the case we weren’t. I remember a tussle and argument with a friend that he sought to settle with the claim that his daddy could beat up my daddy. It occurred to me in that moment that my friend might be right. My father was a good deal older than my friends’ dads, and by the time I was eight years old, my Pop was already fifty, perhaps not such a good match for dads in their late twenties. But without missing a beat, I responded that even if his daddy could beat up my daddy, my Addy could beat up his daddy.

I was recognizing a unity of power and purpose between the father and the son, and in this case, the son was my brother. To be in the safe hands of the one was to be in the safe hands of the other, and to be in my big brother’s hands felt very safe indeed. But I’m telling you, my big brother’s hands are tiny compared to the hands of our brother and Savior Jesus Christ. In his huge hands, Jesus has the power to preserve us and keep us safe, the power to keep anything that threatens us from snatching us out of the hands of our loving God.

And so I wonder this morning what threatens us this day, and whether we are willing to entrust ourselves to the large and loving hands of God, the Father, and his Son, the anointed one or Christ. For today I want to remind you- as well as myself- what we already know, but which we need to hear again and again. No matter what the future...
holds, we are in God’s hands, and nothing can snatch us from his love. And that is true for us not only as individuals, but also as Christ’s church.

As your pastor, I often hear people express concern and disappointment with all that we could be doing if only we had the resources, the commitment and the members. I hear about how much work there is to do and how few hands there are to do it. I hear about how busy we are with other things. I hear about how much it costs to maintain this roof over our heads, and how little money is coming in to pay our bills.

I hear about the good old days when there were two worship services on a Sunday morning, and enough kids running around to drive everybody nuts. But what I want to remind you is that we are in God’s hands not only as individuals, but also as Christ’s church. Nothing can snatch Christ’s church away, not even our occasional fear that when it comes to the church, and this church in particular, God’s hand is too short to save.

I have mentioned a few times and will continue to mention a great line from our Book of Order -which is our constitutional document, but very much more than a rule book. It reads: “Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its building up, and for its service to God” (G-1.0100b). When we really believe that, we will live out of our joyful abundance rather than out of our fretful scarcity. When we really believe that, we will live generously toward the world rather than anxiously guarding what we think is ours alone. When we really believe that, we will go out into the world rather than waiting for the world to come to us.

When we really believe that, we will be lifted up by the Great Commission to be and make disciples (Matt. 28:19-20), rather than be brought down by our excessive concern about the church’s ABCs (attendance, building, and cash).

And I want to ask you today, do we believe it? Do we really believe that right now, we have everything we need to be the church? Because I’ll tell you what. Our mission hasn’t changed. And our God hasn’t changed either.

It is still our mission to love our neighbors, and even to love our enemies. It is still our mission to comfort those who mourn, to heal those who are sick, and to be a friend to the friendless. It is still our mission to be and make disciples. It is still our mission to feed Jesus’ sheep.

But not only is our mission the same, so is our God. Our gracious God still holds the power to save us from the clutches of whatever threatens us, whether what threatens us is our objective reality or our subjective one, the way we frame an understanding of our world, our church, and ourselves.

Isaiah asked rhetorically whether God’s hand was shortened so that it could not redeem us (Isaiah 50:2). The testimony of scripture is that God’s hand is both strong and long enough to save. When we are held in those hands, we can say with the apostle Paul, “neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

And so my question today is, do we believe that? Do we trust Jesus Christ enough to entrust ourselves to him? Then let us live out of our hope, not out of our disappointment; and our confidence, not our discouragement. Let us live out of God’s grace to and acceptance of us, and not out of our indignation at and disapproval of others. Let us live into the reality of our God, whose hand is mighty to save. Halleluiah and amen!