

YOU CAN'T DO THAT BY YOURSELF

Texts on Christ the King Sunday

Ezekiel 34: 1-16; Matthew 25: 31-46

Before I read from the prophet Ezekiel, a reminder about his audience. The destruction of Jerusalem is done. The city is burned, the temple is destroyed, the people are ruined. The tragedy is complete. Some—the most educated and powerful—have been exiled to conquering Babylon. Most are left behind in Judah to their poor farms and day labors, ruled by the victors. Ezekiel himself was exiled, but he traveled back to Jerusalem once or twice. Now you will hear him speak several times of “the shepherds.” He doesn’t mean sheep herders. He means the people who were to have taken care of the nation, who should have guarded the least and the lost. He means Washington and Albany. He means Wall Street. He means all who are comfortable. Listen. *[Read Ezekiel 34: 1-16]*

But God, you can't do that by yourself. I know one is not supposed to say that. It's not how our hymns go—God merciful and mighty, God the mighty fortress, God our help in ages past— but let's be simple in our speech: If God hates how leaders help themselves and hurt the people; if God hates how the healthy ignore the sick and leave them who have no resources to suffer and die young; if God hates how the rich mangle the welfare of millions but walk away sleek in suits and heels while the weak ones fail; if God is tired of the incompetent louts who rise to heights of power only to fall into the pit of their voracious desire for more and more; if God sees all these outrages and has a strong will to match—then wouldn't you expect God to fire the whole lot and say on behalf of them whom he loves and grieves for, “I will bring them out, I will feed them, I will seek the lost, I will bind the injured, I myself will be their shepherd?”

But God, how are you going to do that? I mean no disrespect, my Lord, but haven't you got a problem? Don't you need a body for that kind of work? Haven't you just shown your hand, and it's low cards, no kings, no aces? You're going to be the shepherd of the sheep? You can't do that by yourself!

Now, someone may be thinking, “Well, he means Jesus.” Not so fast. The date is about 585 B.C.E. Ezekiel's is offering his word like that of a father and mother. What parent would offer to help . . . in 600 years? You may not think much of the current administration, or you may be dreading the next one, but would you give a minute to a man on a soapbox saying good government is just around the corner for your great great great great . . . grandchildren? Ezekiel is not talking about Jesus. He is breaking his religion to pieces. He is saying, We had God wrong. We had God shut up in heaven, boxed into that temple. We thought our dynasty from David was to go on for ever. For centuries, we thought—we were taught—that God had thrown up a shield of protection around our nation. Some people believe stuff like this about America, but not because the Bible tells them so. They're dreaming. Ezekiel is shaking the children from sleep. God is not a god of ordinary shelter from storms.

Now all is in ruins. The prophet has absorbed in his person the shock of God's silence as war, rapine, famine, destruction and poverty shredded the fabric of community and tradition. Now the prophet is ready to speak a new word, a word he himself does not fully grasp—only that it sounds true, the way a bell can sound true, or a melody can speak true. No more the child's magical wish for protection. No more denial. No more distance, *I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, says the Lord.*

But how, dear God? You can't do that by yourself. And suddenly the people—some of the people—begin to hear this word inside themselves. It is as if they are waking up from a dream. God needs a body—not just a head, but a body. A moment later, Ezekiel starts to open the riddle of God's body: “I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them . . . and be their

shepherd . . . I, the LORD, have spoken.”. (Eze 34.22-24) But David has been dead for four hundred years. Everybody knows that. And everybody knows that the very last heirs to his throne, two boys, were murdered in Jerusalem a few years ago by the Babylonian Guard. Will I set over them my servant David, says the Lord? Who is this?

If you have you been in the middle of ruin, your ear is more likely to understand what I am about to say. There, in the middle of the ruin of your marriage . . . of your business . . . of your career . . . of your faith . . . you. From that place, did you hear a word that gave you life, even though it changed nothing in your situation? A word that somehow lifted your eye from the smoking ruins of your sorrow—not to a mere solution but higher, far higher—to a new being, a new way of being? Being no longer just waiting, sadly, for good to come back, but being changed and free, free at last, at least for a moment, while the word that you heard rang ‘round the bell of your soul? Maybe the word was on the lips of your sister . . . and the wall of impossibility in your situation seemed to move. Perhaps the word lay there in three lines of a book, and you were suddenly light. Maybe it was a religious word, maybe not. However it was, inside that word, no matter how small, you were free, really free. An agent, not a patient; able to act, not just watch or wait. Such a moment does not last forever, but it puts a question to you forever: Which is the truth, the vision of freedom or the eye black with smoke and ruin? The new being, or the old self and sorrows?

Now, you may not have suffered like this, or heard or a word like that. If not, I hope you may accept this. Experience such as I have just described is the point of religion. It is not for children. It is not facts about great things God once did. It is not dreamy promises of good things yet to come. Religion is for God come down now. Among you. In the midst of things gone wrong.

When Ezekiel cries out to the afflicted, *I the Lord, I myself will be your shepherd, I will set my servant David over you*—and they know that all the descendants of David are dead—the word lifts their eyes from their miserable condition and from the greedy men who misled them to the possibility of God come down now among them; God already powerful among them to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly. In the decades that would follow, the religion we call Judaism sprang to flower at last. No priests, no animal sacrifices required, no temple needed. Free to love and honor both God and God’s creatures wherever life and death should lead.

In a distant time, some Jews saw in Jesus of Nazareth this spirit of David the good shepherd, the servant of God. Jesus acted like one who would rule justly and care for them and not cheat them. And they wanted to make him king, to save them. *Hosanna!* they sang. It means *Save us now!* You do it, you save us. Sometimes, we still seem to shout to Jesus like that. We call him Christ the King. Save us from our sins, save us now. But Jesus says *No, I can’t do that by myself.* “Go in peace, your faith has saved you.” “You give them something to eat.” “Greater works than mine will you do.” Through the centuries, Christians have so often wanted not to hear the word of the gospel of Jesus, so strong: *I can’t do this by myself.*

Perhaps today you are hearing it. Listen to how Jesus took Ezekiel’s word down from the dusty shelf of ears long not hearing. [Read Matt 25: 31-46] *I can’t do this by myself, says the Lord. I need a body. My body is broken . . . for you. I need a body. You will be my body, rising to guide and govern the world. You will tend my lambs, you will feed my sheep. You will welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the uninsured, visit the prisons. You are the body of Christ, for he can’t do this by himself.*

And you—you can’t do this by yourselves, either. You can’t heal the sick, or comfort the afflicted, or feed the hungry. The needs have no end. We can never succeed, to put it quite simply and bluntly. Not at anything. Everything we do is partial, obscure, at least a little broken. Thanksgiving dinner won’t be perfect. Christmas joy will not reflect your perfect memory of it. The new presidency will not restore

life to normal and right all injustices. The impossible frailty, even futility, of our actions, both personal and public, can pitch a mind into despair. We can't complete anything, we can't do anything, by ourselves. Maybe the dishes—but that's no fun. Is it not amazing? In order to work on what is good and worthwhile, we need that word of everlasting hope, the word like Ezekiel's, the Word of God come down now. We live by that word, more than by the bread we break each day. Yet God's Word, in order to live and love on earth as it is in heaven, needs a body, needs you. You just can't do this by yourself.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

delivered at First United Presbyterian Church, Silver Creek, N.Y.