

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24 “Justice-fed in Exile” Rev. Janet Chapman 11/22/20

As I proofread Mikayla’s final set of application papers for her preferred law school, I was brought back to a movie with John Travolta called “Civil Action.” Mikayla is particularly interested in public policy and social justice as is Travolta’s character in the movie. He plays a lawyer representing the plaintiffs in a civil lawsuit being brought against a large corporation who has been polluting the environment. Chemical waste is being dumped into the rivers of a poor town in Massachusetts, causing cancer to break out among the townspeople.

Unfortunately, this lawyer and his small firm are no match for the tremendous legal services the corporation can buy. Little by little, the corporation exhausts the lawyer’s financial resources and destroys his firm. In one highly dramatic scene, the lawyer stands before a bankruptcy judge and declares that \$14 and a portable radio are all the possessions he has left in the world. The judge responds in amazement, “Where are all the things that you should have accumulated in order to give you your identity?” The simple line speaks volumes as it is exactly how our society evaluates the worth of an individual.

Our text from the prophet Ezekiel points to individuals who had accumulated very little in their lifetimes and therefore were deemed inferior, namely, shepherds. The image of a shepherd in biblical tradition was not known for wealth, but instead the shepherd’s value was determined by their care-taking abilities. From Abel, the first tender of flocks, to Rachel & Zipporah, both of whom were tending their fathers’ flocks, to Moses and David, both of whom received a call from God while watching sheep, the image of a shepherd was common for the people who created and maintained the stories of ancient Israel. It even became one way of speaking of God, as we see in the beloved Psalm 23. What is striking about our text is that

Ezekiel takes the humble shepherd image and elevates it to the expectations we should have for our civic leaders. He implies that good governmental leaders are those who embrace the role of shepherd and tend their flock of citizens with justice and equity. The current governmental leaders of Ezekiel's time receive some harsh words for they have been derelict in their responsibilities and have improved their lives at the expense of the people they were called to serve. The people have suffered as a result. It doesn't take any great insight and really doesn't matter whether one is liberal or conservative, democrat or republican, to see that there is a wide chasm in our 21st century governmental practices with regards to self-serving versus shepherding leadership. Our nation as a whole tends to lean heavily on the side of self-serving as accented by the judge in the movie.

Ezekiel 34 slips into our imagination as a text which highlights the incongruity between healthy public practice and public power versus the unhealthy. It is important for us to recognize that forced migrations by the Babylonians had caused the Israelites to be scattered like sheep in a large field, and they had wandered off into desolate places. Yahweh, the God of Israel, gives one long speech in strong first-person assertions concerning the care and governance of the flock, the people. Yahweh addresses the kings, the leaders, and reminds them they must listen, they do not get to answer back. This is atypical to our human experience where the kings do all the talking, but not with Yahweh. Now the kings must listen to the one who has a right to speak. Governments and public systems of value are addressed by God in a sovereign way and are subject to that voice. This exchange and others like it in the Bible are what some people in our local area have referred to when arguing that God makes the decisions on when and where people can congregate to worship, not the government. I can't

tell you how many times I have been confronted by someone on social media who questions our church's decision to not meet in person or to meet outdoors to honor health and safety guidelines. Their assertion is that we are bowing to governmental regulations over God. The problem with using our text in such a way is that we would be placing our needs, our greed, over the practice of compassion and that clearly has nothing to do with honoring or worshipping God. One of the central points of this text according to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman is that governments or entities which are self-serving and practice greed, along with a failure of compassion, are in big trouble from God. This is a basic premise of the Bible that goes all the way back to Exodus. The kings, which could easily be any governmental or religious leader, were not necessarily wicked people. Rather they had simply fashioned a system of value that was self-serving, that benefitted established interests and from which the issues of justice and compassion had disappeared. In these COVID days, it gets murky and hard to distinguish, but ultimately the decision not to wear a mask, not to socially distance, not to practice health standards which prevent the spread of this disease is a decision to make you and I more comfortable; from a minister's standpoint, I can assure you that ministry is so much easier when we can meet in person, and I don't know about you, but I like easy. However, deciding to keep my life easy and comfortable is exactly what Yahweh is addressing here. So Yahweh speaks out an alternative, basically like saying, "If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself." God says, "I will intervene in your practices that don't care for the well-being of others; I will seek out my sheep, I will rescue them, I will bring them back, I will feed them. I will be shepherd of my sheep. I will seek the lost. I will bring back the stranger. I will bind up the crippled. I will strengthen the weak." God promises to restore the people who

have been shoved to the margins of despair, who have been lassoed with sickness which could have been contained if better care had been taken. God then informs the people that those who were tasked with their well-being, who instead abused them for their own comfort and gain, will be brought to account. And then comes this conclusive word, “I will feed them in justice.” The Holy One promises to “feed the new flock with justice.” This is an unusual statement for “justice” is not something understood as feed for animals. The word in Hebrew, *mishpat*, comes from the root that means “judge” and it is connected to human judges, so *mishpat* is the just rulings of a fair judge. Imagine the thin, straggly sheep sitting down and feasting sumptuously at a fine banquet of due process, civil rights, economic justice, and equal protection, served on fine linen with toasts to equity and human dignity. The fat sheep choke on the same fare, for as they consume, they will be consumed by God’s justice. Justice is that one menu item on the Thanksgiving table that should never disappear from public life.

In our world today, many people are seeking a new shepherd, a new promise, a new direction to follow. Those who once lived with hope have been scattered and frayed because of COVID, political disputes, racism, economic hardships, and other harms which cause people to stray. More people than we care to admit have been nudged away from keeping connected to God’s flock, but God promises to seek them out and bring them back. God still speaks up faithfully, through you and me, on behalf of those who have been pushed to the sidelines. As the text draws to a close, God makes a covenant with the Israelites as with us – a contract or agreement, if you will – that promises peace or *shalom* for all. Peace is not a complete interpretation of *shalom* which is better translated wholeness or well-being. *Shalom* embraces both personal and communal wholeness and health. *Shalom* embraces justice, reconciliation,

and nonviolence. The covenant that the Holy One promises is one in which the people and all of creation will experience the fullness of shalom. One scholar likened this covenant as God's promise to be that internal GPS which directs us to the desired destination and warns us of dangers or delays ahead. Our promise to God comes in the form of ways we can care for those who have been pushed to the edges. Every year, God invites us into covenant where we seek to pledge our time, talents, and resources, to keep transmitting God's GPS to all who have gone astray and are looking for that Guiding Shepherd to lead them safely into the realm of shalom. You are invited this week in your celebrations of Thanksgiving to practice shalom for the well-being and health of friends and loved ones, to return your Stewardship covenant cards to the church that God's ministry and mission will grow stronger, and to establish God's proper rule of governing and leadership where all shall be fed with justice. Amen.