

FOCUSED ON FAITH: BE HUNGRY

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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

In the year 587 BC, Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, was captured by King Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonian Empire. Many of the citizens of Jerusalem and Judah were forcibly taken back to Babylon in a traumatic event known as the Exile. Some viewed this as an act of God as judgment over a sinful people.

One of those taken into Exile was a priest named Ezekiel. In Exile in Babylon, Ezekiel became a powerful voice for God, and his status was raised from priest to prophet. Ezekiel was a colorful character. When he spoke he would fall down, sometimes he traveled long distances in a trance, he saw strange things, he proclaimed dangerous messages. According to some Jewish traditions, the book of Ezekiel was to be read only by those over the age of 30.

The Book of Ezekiel is complex. It is filled with prophecies of judgment, oracle's about foreign nations, long discussions on God's restoration of Judah. The book closes with nine chapters on a detailed vision of the new temple as imagined by Ezekiel. The first half of the book largely consists of prophecies of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem and those taken into Exile.

However, not all of the book of Ezekiel is judgment and condemnation. There is also to be found in its pages a message of hope. Ezekiel has witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and experienced the Exile. In the face of this he proclaims the promise of restoration—the promise that God would return the people to Jerusalem.

Our reading for today offers such a message of hope. Ezekiel compares the people of Jerusalem to a flock of sheep. And as a flock they are clearly lost; they are quite literally scattered across the world. The good news is that God claims these lost sheep to become their shepherd. God says: *I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from the places to which they have been scattered. I will bring them to their own land. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel. I will feed them with good pasture. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I will seek the lost. I will bring back the strayed. I will bind up the injured. I will strengthen the weak.* This is the promise God makes through Ezekiel—to be the shepherd for the lost and broken, to feed and protect them, to guide them.

But that is not all. God will also rain judgment on those sheep who have mistreated or persecuted other sheep. Ezekiel differentiates between what he calls the fat sheep and the lean sheep. The fat sheep are strong and they use their power to push and butt and scatter the weak. They failed to use their power to help the least. These are the sheep God will judge. The lean sheep are the ones at the bottom

of the power food chain. They are the lost, the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the imprisoned. They are the ones misused and mistreated.

God promises to save the flock, to no longer allow it to be ravaged. God will establish one shepherd over the flock, as king. As we read verse 23 and 24: *I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.*

This is the prophecy of hope brought by Ezekiel—that a people who are lost and broken will have a king. They will be watched over and cared for. They will be protected and fed.

Today is a day that we in the church all Christ the King Sunday. Different cultures have different calendars, different ways to mark the passage through the year. The Chinese have their calendar. (This is the year of the rooster.) Jews have a calendar which is lunar-based. During the French Revolution in the late 1700s, the French government implemented what is known as the French Republican calendar with weeks that were ten days long instead of seven. The idea was to remove all religious and royalist influences from the calendar. The French used that calendar for about twelve years. The ancient Mayans had a calendar but it said we would all be wiped out in the year 2012—five years ago. I guess not.

The church even has its own calendar, and today happens to be the final Sunday of the year. Next Sunday marks the beginning of a new liturgical year with the start of Advent. The season of Advent is four weeks long and culminates with Christmas. From Christmas we go on to Lent and Easter, Pentecost, and then back to Christ the King, where we are today.

In our church we like to talk about lives as being a spiritual journey. The liturgical calendar takes us on a liturgical journey that is twelve months long. It is a journey we repeat over and over. When we imagine our lives as a journey, then we naturally imagine a starting and ending point. Our starting point, normally, would be our birth and the ending point, normally, our death.

We like to think of our journey as always moving onward and upward—like climbing a mountain. We would hope that our journey will take us closer and closer to God.

If we consider the liturgical calendar as such a journey that we follow each year then we run into a problem. When you reach Christ the King Sunday, the end of the year, are you at the top of the mountain? Where do you go from there? And how do you get down to start over at Advent? Do you jump off the side of the mountain? We like to end the year with a bang, not a splat.

It helps to think of the liturgical calendar not as a journey from point A to point B but as a circle, or a track that runners race on. Each time we go around the track changes because we are different, made different by the journey itself.

I'll have a birthday this year—just like last year. But I'll be a different person in 2018 than I was in 2017. Each year when we celebrate Christmas or Easter or Christ the King, we do so differently because we have been changed by our spiritual journey.

When we hear the title “Christ the King” and realize that it is the final Sunday on the church calendar, our impulse is to celebrate. We've done it. We are triumphant. The one whose birth we will soon celebrate is King. He's victorious. We're victorious. The season is over and we've won the Super Bowl, the World Series, the SEC championship. Raise your glass of champagne and light the Roman candles. It's time to celebrate.

If we arrive at that point then it is like we are at the top of the mountain. How then do we make the transition from the high of victory to the humble birth of a child? How do we return to the beginnings of the year?

The problem with this scenario is power, or at least our understanding of it. The power of Jesus the king, the conqueror, the victor is not the power of control but the power of compassion. Power should make every Christian uneasy because this is not what our faith is about.

To be a Christian is not about amassing power, controlling power, or using power. Being a Christian is about something else entirely. It is about submitting to power.

Today's sermon is the second of these series I'm calling *Focused on Faith*. As we get nearer to Christmas and our celebration that God is among us, we need to ask ourselves how we will prepare, how do we get ready for the coming of the Lord? The answer is that we focus on our faith. We don't focus on our works, or our wealth, or our power, but on our faith. That is how we should prepare to meet the Lord.

On this day that we celebrate Christ as King, let us recall he is not a king of armies but of sheep—lost sheep. He is king but he died for us on the cross. He was hungry, thirsty, naked, and abandoned. Jesus calls his followers to care, not to conquer, to love, not to manipulate, to deliver, not destroy. His soldiers are armed only with compassion.

So, today, as we celebrate Christ the King, let us take a moment and remember what kind of king Jesus is. He is a poor king—born in a barn. He talks about a kingdom of heaven, not any kingdom on earth. He does not inhabit a palace but walks across the countryside preaching to the crowds. He has no army, just disciples. His crown is not gold but thorns. He doesn't hobnob with the nobility but

embraces the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the imprisoned. He is a king for all.

This day of Christ the King is a transition into Advent and Christmas. We circle the year being challenged and changed by every revolution. But when we arrive at Christ the King, we may be at the top of the mountain, but we don't have to climb down to Advent. Advent has been raised to our level waiting for us to start again, this time just a bit closer to God.