

“Job Posting: Shepherd”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, November 22, 2020

Ezekiel 34

Ezekiel was a prophet of God, who in the 6th century BCE stood with the exiled people of Judea, by the ‘river Chebar, in the land of the Chaldeans’ and he tells them about the role of the shepherd. “I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.”

These phrases are reminiscent of the well-known lines from the Twenty Third Psalm – “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” If you’re musically minded, you will hear the strains of Bach’s “Sheep May Safely Graze” playing in the background. The shepherd, as protector, is a profound image in our religious memory. Many stained-glass windows include a picture of Jesus holding a little lamb in his arms – and the caption reads ‘The Good Shepherd.’

But Ezekiel departs from this warm and fuzzy pastoral presence of the shepherd when he abruptly shifts to a description of the shepherd that includes: “But the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.” This jarring note silences the Sheep May Safely Graze music going on in my head. Destroy? Justice? Ezekiel continues, “I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.”

In the ancient world, leaders were often seen as shepherds, who would not only care for the people, but keep them safe from all enemies. The work of the shepherd required a tough edge, to bring justice and judgement to right wrongs, to punish those who transgressed. This language is reflected in Ezekiel’s words: “Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the weak. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.”

Ezekiel also mentions that the grasses of the pastures have been trampled, and the waters muddied by the feet of the fat sheep that have taken all they want for themselves. They’ve butted and bumped and pushed their way to what they want, leaving nothing for the smaller, frailer animals that have been pushed aside.

God says, enough of this.

Being a shepherd isn't just about the warm and fuzzy twenty third psalm kind of comfort. Being a shepherd is about fighting for the welfare of the sheep that have been picked on. As one commentary put it, "The famous shepherd of the 23rd Psalm is a comforting presence to the psalmist because the shepherd is armed to the teeth, a rod in one hand, and a staff in the other."¹ This 'armed to the teeth' picture of the shepherd blows away the pastoral image of the shepherd of Psalm 23, calmly walking beside the still waters.

Ezekiel pushes the metaphor to an edge I rarely see – to see the harder side of the shepherd, who will fight with a rod, who will go in for the fight. We've romanticized the image of the shepherd, and taken away this tough edge that is tense, ready to fight, ready to enact judgement to bring justice. There is a binding together of the pastoral and the prophetic in the image of the shepherd, the calming voice of the pastoral shepherd, and the harsher voice of the prophetic that demands justice.

Early last year, I attended a 'social enterprise' workshop at Trinity United in Newmarket. The speaker was Shaun Loney who works with First Nations, non-profits and governments to promote social innovation. His company Encompass Co-op mentored a non-profit called Aki Foods that produces food in Garden Hill, a First Nations reserve in northern Manitoba. The 13-acre farm produces chickens, eggs, turkeys and vegetables. The idea he says was "to out-compete the [other store in town] Winnipeg-based Northern Store with healthy, locally produced food."²

The Northern Store receives \$1 Million dollars in funding from the federal Nutrition North Canada program. None of what the Aki Foods farm "raises or grows is eligible for the subsidies because, in order to qualify, the food must be flown in from the outside."³ "Aki Foods pays the full freight costs of shipping things like seed potatoes and baby chicks, and the Northern Store gets a big subsidy on imported chicken and potatoes. [Loney notes] that most of this subsidized, imported chicken is deep-fried at a new Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet connected to the Northern Store."⁴

In talking to the civil servants responsible for reviewing Nutrition North funding, Loney was told that "they most certainly would not make local food eligible for any subsidy. There would continue to be no money for the re-emergence of local food economies out of this program. They said it wasn't their job to support local food solutions."⁵ The marketing of unhealthy food choices, like the fast food at the KFC outlet, to the indigenous community is set at a higher priority than subsidizing locally grown food that is healthy and nutritious, and creates jobs.

Psalm 100 reflects the harmony of God's desired outcome – "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." A place where there will be one shepherd, and he shall feed them. A place

¹ Feasting on the Word, Theological Perspective, 314-316.

² Shaun Loney, *The Beautiful Bailout: How a Social Innovation Scale-up Will Solve Government's Priciest Problems* (Canada: Friesens, 2018), 23.

³ Loney, *The Beautiful Bailout*, 23-24.

⁴ Loney, *The Beautiful Bailout*, 25.

⁵ Loney, *The Beautiful Bailout*, 26.

where we're all in this together, where together the community will flourish. Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams writes that the Christian tradition "involves an attempt to model ways of living together, ways of exercising authority ... within the basic recognition that we have no choice but to take time with one another – with the other who is not going away."⁶

What is not going away is the 'Indian problem' that more than a hundred years ago initiated the establishment of the 1876 Indian Act – an Act written to do away with the 'Indian problem' through assimilation, and as the Truth & Reconciliation Commission named it, cultural genocide. What is not going away is the homeless in our town, even though shelters have been built and food banks established. The homeless are still with us. What is not going away is the fragile and weakened sheep that have been butted out of the pasture.

One thing that the Covid pandemic has taught us is that we are relearning what it means to think of the other. We wear a mask. We socially distance. We don't do group events. We are remembering what it means to hold each other in community. We are learning to share that pasture, to not trample the grass so that all may eat their fill. We are learning not to muddy the waters because every one needs access to the water.

In Ezekiel's prophetic words, God is reclaiming the dual identity of the shepherd – the pastoral voice in the shepherd that we meet by the green pastures of Psalm 23, *and* the prophetic voice that we hear in Ezekiel who is going to make the bully sheep eat the bitter food of justice.

The world needs the prophetic *and* the pastoral.

And *both* are found in you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Rowan Williams, *The Way of St. Benedict* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020), 40.