

**“Fed with Justice . . . Thankfully”**  
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I don't know about you, but my family's plans for Thanksgiving this year have changed a few times. When we first moved to the area, we were excited about the possibility that we might, because of being geographically closer to Kevin's family, be able to have Thanksgiving with them for the first time in nine years. But, then, after speaking with Kevin's parents, and hearing of their completely valid concerns about traveling to us during COVID-19, we then moved to plan B. We began to talk and dream of the fun we might have if we took Micah to Philadelphia for the first time. Philadelphia was an important city when Kevin and I were dating and then first married. We thought a fun weekend getaway to Philly would be a fun family memory this Thanksgiving. But, just in this past week, with all of the news reports about the spikes in COVID cases just about everywhere, we felt that traveling to a densely populated urban area would be a too much of risk. And so, we are now landing on Plan C, which looks probably like many of your own plans: a quiet Thanksgiving at home by ourselves—hoping at least for some nice weather so we can enjoy the area—maybe taking a trip down to the Harriet Tubman museum in Maryland.

Through the church's social media platforms, I've been sharing daily posts entitled 30 Days Thankful. Maybe you've followed it on FaceBook or Instagram. What has it felt like to be drawn to thankfulness each day during this challenging November with the election and another pandemic surge? What does it mean for us to give thanks to God not FOR everything but IN every circumstance? And, what exactly are we to thank God for this year? These are important and weighty questions, my friends. If we are honest, we may be struggling a bit right now to really enter into the robust, exuberant praise of Psalm 100. After all, how can we raise our voices to shout our praise to God when we can't even gather together in the same location for worship, much less use our voices to sing together?

So maybe the better approach to answering these timely questions about thanking God **in but not for** everything is to hone in on our passage in Ezekiel—allowing it to lead us into a powerful picture not of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, for this is not a passage about Jesus, but of God and God's care for humanity. You see, what I find so compelling about this text as our main focus going into Thanksgiving this week is this: it follows directly on a passage in which Ezekiel condemns the shepherds of Israel, who have **not** taken care of the sheep. Ezekiel 34:3-4 says: “You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. . . . With force and harshness you have ruled them.” Our passage today is God's way of saying, “Step aside, shepherds, and let me show you how it's done.” And that, dear friends, after a year of harshness, a year where leaders all around have failed us and our communities, is such very good news for which we can, I hope, say without any hesitation, “Thank you, God!” this Thanksgiving.

We are all familiar with the shepherding image in scripture. A month or so ago, our Praying the Psalms group returned to Psalm 23 as it was the lectionary psalm for one of our

Sundays. Our John Bible study has referenced many times the Good Shepherd text in John's Gospel. The challenge however is that the church has so often romanticized the shepherding metaphor that we can easily miss and forget not only the foul and stinky reality of shepherding but also the way that the shepherding metaphor is always employed in scripture as a way to emphasize the ruler's responsibility to establish justice so that the people may flourish.

But our passage in Ezekiel 34 today gives us an opportunity to revisit the shepherding metaphor, receiving it with joy and thankfulness for the way it depicts God as Israel's shepherd who promises to destroy the fat sheep while feeding and nurturing the lean ones. In other words, the picture of God as the Good Shepherd allows us to see that God is the one who holds together, what we so often separate: **care and justice**. God the Good Shepherd is here the one who corrects situations that perpetuate injustice and abuse. In fact, vs. 16 demonstrates that God's very means for delivering care to this sheep is justice: "I will feed them with justice" is a profound image of justice and care kept in balance as if they were two sides of the same coin.

What we have seen, most profoundly and painfully in our nation this year is the exact opposite: **justice and care have been separated from one another in our politics**. And while I know I may receive pushback from some of you, but please hear me well: the gospel is always political—for politics is simply the way that the people decide to live together in the polis. But the gospel is never partisan. So this metaphor of God as the Good Shepherd is political simply because to be a king was to be a shepherd. This shepherd metaphor is meant to shape our understanding of the proper exercise of power. It emphasizes for us that it is the ruler's responsibility to establish justice so that the people may flourish. The prophet Ezekiel lifts up this metaphor as a way to condemn not only Israel's shepherds but also the rulers of Babylonia. Because the people have been exploited, the nation has been destroyed. If Ezekiel was here today in today's political sphere, would he last even 2 months if he spoke out from the pulpit against today's political leaders as he spoke out in his day?

Church: these words are coming to us from our sacred text. As we prayed, may these ancient words of scripture become for us the living voice of God. May the Spirit give us ears to hear. May we see in this text that God is the Good Shepherd who wants to come and "take stock" after the damage of all that has gone on in our country this year. In our passage, the result of God's having taken stock of the damage in vs. 11-12 is that God is propelled into a rescue operation of seeking out the abused sheep and then resettling them and reasserting God's authority over them as their shepherd. May these words not only comfort us, may they not only compel us to genuine responses of gratitude and thanksgiving, but may this example of wise and just ruling show us what we Christians should be working for in the world and to what standard of accountability we should be holding all of our political leaders.

The prophet Ezekiel is intentionally vivid here, but he's not vitriolic. The words are saturated with detail, but not outright disgust. We find not a litany of curses—there is no

ranting, no exclamatory hyperbole—all of which, as we know all too well, rules within our public discourse these days.

What Ezekiel shows us is God as resolute but weary—almost grieved at once again having to set people straight on the path of justice. For all us feeling weary on the path of justice, know that the one who comes before us and shares in our weariness is God. But here's the difference: God's weariness never leads to resignation. No, God is utterly active and involved, both with the poor, thin sheep and with the fat, disobedient ones. From Ezekiel we see that God the Shepherd in fact rescues the sheep from the valley of the shadow of death. Thanks be to God! At God the Shepherd's banqueting table, the menu is justice and the bullying sheep must somehow choke it down. Thanks be to God. And God's anointing is not only for the afflicted but in fact for a new shepherd—God's own servant, David, who will succeed in all the ways that the previous shepherds have failed. Thanks be to God!

This morning is also Christ the King Sunday, so let us give thanks that the King who came after David is Jesus. And recall from last Sunday, that the Risen King Jesus continues to call us into the ministry of feeding sheep. If we leave with anything at all today, let it be the reminder that the shepherd image is about love and compassion for another living thing—to the point of self-sacrifice. The calling to us today that is inherent in this passage is to do as God does: to care for the least, the last, the lost, and the excluded of society, out of a deep sense of love and compassion. But, you may be saying to yourselves: this is so difficult for us to live out—it requires moving out of our comfort zones, not to mention our COVID-19 restrictions. I don't pretend to have answers about COVID—but I do know that we cannot allow it to prevent us to dream together about what God may be calling us to in the coming year. Because, my friends, we must move beyond the four walls of the church. COVID's gone ahead and pushed us out of here already. But what I mean most particularly is that our calling to emulate God, our Good Shepherd, is a calling that will require us to do more than write a check for mission. It might mean getting more relationally invested with our neighbors in West Rehoboth. It may mean seeking to build intergenerational relationships in our church and with our schools. It may mean deepening our commitment to be community organizing partners with the Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice. After all, being a shepherd means getting dirty. It means sleeping with the sheep, carrying them to safety, binding their wounds and caring for the nutritional needs. It is hard, I know, for many of us, to engage in hands on ministry. But, I want to suggest that we still must seek after the leading of our Good Shepherd in this matter.

So, as we approach Thanksgiving, may we do so with true and heartfelt thanks to God our Good Shepherd—who holds together care and justice, and beckons us to do the same. May our pledges for 2021 be only the beginning of the ways we embody our call to respond to the Good Shepherd in gratitude. May we stewardship not only our money and resources but also our hearts, our time investment, and our relational capacity by responding with love and compassion, holding together care and justice, as we serve in hands on ways in our communities. Thanks be to God. Amen.