

The Second Baptist Pulpit

**“The Shepherd King”
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
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Imagine—and for too many people today this doesn't take a lot of imagination— you are out of a job right now, laid off. You're looking through the classified ads in today's *Commercial Appeal*. You come across a listing that reads something like this:

Help wanted.

A person who loves the great outdoors (both summer and winter). Is willing to work with small, smelly, often difficult to handle animals that

aren't the smartest creatures in the world. Must be able to ward off attacks from wolves and/or packs of wild dogs. Must be willing to sacrifice your wants for the needs of the animals. Will often work alone, at night, with a dog or two as companions. Minimum wage. Few benefits.

Let's just say this doesn't sound like the most prestigious or glamorous job in the world. You move on. The

next listing you see reads like this:

Help wanted.

Must have outstanding people and communication skills and be able to influence people by your words and actions. Will travel often to meet with world leaders. Willing to take part in royal ceremonies, parades, and make many public appearances with famous people. Great pay offered. Access to crown jewels. All your personal security and housing (in the most beautiful home in the country) provided. A high profile position.

If you could choose your job, do you want to be a shepherd or a king?

In the tradition of the Christian church calendar, this is the last Sunday before the Christian year starts all over again next week with the first Sunday of Advent. This last Sunday of the year is traditionally known as Christ the King Sunday.

Do you want your God to be a king... or a shepherd? With all of the problems you and I face in our lives, who

do we most want to have access to for help, who do we most want to call on—a shepherd or a king?

Can we reconcile God being a king with being a shepherd?

We do want to call on God as a powerful King. No doubt about that. But that's not all.

There are times when we feel about as lost and vulnerable as a little lamb that got separated from the flock-- one who's standing on a hillside by himself, his head swiveling from side to side looking for the other sheep, bleating nervously in fear. There are those times.

And we sing:

*Savior, like a shepherd lead us,
Much we need Thy tender care;
In Thy pleasant pastures feed us,
For our use Thy folds prepare.*

*We are Thine; do Thou befriend us,
Be the guardian of our way;
Keep Thy flock from sin defend us,
Seek us when we go astray.*

And when we sing those words, do you hear a response from just over the hill, just out of sight? It's a voice—a voice you've heard before, a voice you know. You know that voice. It says:

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the water-courses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land;

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 myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make

them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the weak.

I need a king, sure. But I also need a shepherd.

Ezekiel was a Jewish prophet. He was deported from Jerusalem with the other Jews when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem in 597 BC. God is speaking this message through Ezekiel to a people who have been scattered out of their homeland.

They are not able really to come together for worship. Even their Temple was destroyed. God is speaking here to people who are like stray sheep, separated from the flock, bleating in fear, unsure if they'll ever find their way home, wondering if they still have a shepherd, and if they do, if he has forgotten them.

And God says:

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured I will strengthen the weak.

When I was little I pictured God as an old man with long white hair and a long white beard. He wore a shiny blue robe. I don't know where I got that image, but I can still picture it today.

But now that I'm grown up, I'd rather picture God as a shepherd on the move. Don't picture God as a wise old king sitting on his throne waiting for us to call on him or make a request.

He's a shepherd on the move: seeking the lost—not waiting, seeking, bringing back the stray—not casting out, but bringing them back, binding up the injured strengthening the weak.

If you've been paying attention to things at all this week, you've certainly heard about Annabelle Hulkan's stolen wheelchair. Annabelle is one of my wife Heidi's students at Grahamwood. She has a brother who has played on our soccer teams here at Second.

Annabelle has spina bifida. As you have seen, she is just about the cutest thing you've ever seen. And she is very

sassy. She may have handicaps and be behind in her development in some ways, but socially she is like an adult. If I call Heidi during the day, after Heidi hangs up with me, this little Annabelle will often say, *Well, what did Brent want? Is he at work?*

And as you've no doubt heard, her special, customized wheelchair was stolen out of the back of her sitter's truck this week. Jackie Jackson is Annabelle's helper. She is a retired special ed teacher, and now she works for Annabelle's parents and helps them take care of her. Annabelle and Heidi and all of them call her Gran.

As you have heard, after the wheelchair was stolen and there was all the publicity, it was returned in pieces. Heidi said that it wasn't just a bunch of pieces dumped in a box. It was put in that box with obvious care. The screws were all in a baggie. The smaller pieces were also in baggies. Annabelle's ribbons and other decorations were put in a baggie. The bigger pieces were neatly packed in the box.

Gran, Annabelle's caregiver, told Heidi that she chooses to believe that the person who stole the wheelchair had a change of heart. And the way the pieces were carefully put in that box, Gran says, shows that that soul is salvageable. That's what she said about the person who stole the chair: That soul is salvageable. That line stuck with me.

Aren't you glad that we have a God who seems to believe that every soul is salvageable? That's the very heart of the gospel, the central message of the Bible. Even lost souls are salvageable. Whether we're talking about souls that have committed crimes or souls that have been hurt, souls that have done evil deeds or souls that are lonely and afraid, God sees the world with eyes of one who knows and believes that that soul is salvageable.

I will seek the lost, God says, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured I will strengthen the weak.

You can be sure that there will be days—and it may be today—when you feel like a lost little sheep. So what will make the difference?

You know, deep in your heart, because you are one of his sheep, that there is a shepherd looking to bring back into the fold the lost, the abandoned, the anxious, the hopeless, the disobedient, the needy, the sick, the depressed, the messed up, the frightened.

There's a book that I really enjoyed reading called *Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamott. She grew up with hippie parents in northern California. Alcohol and drugs and illicit sex were so much a part of her family life, she didn't know you could live any other way. Christian rhetoric about family values didn't mean much to her.

After an abortion had left her with bleeding she couldn't seem to stop-- physically or spiritually, she was lying in her bed one night, hung over and desperately sad.

She turned out the light, and while she lay there, she writes, *I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I felt over the years when I was frightened or alone.*

The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course there wasn't. But after awhile, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus.

She said the whole idea seemed appalling to her. She knew what her smart, progressive, secular friends would think of her if she became a Christian. And she turned to the wall and said out loud, *I'd rather die.*

And, of course, that is the very condition and state of being—lost and vulnerable—that God says he will seek out and see as salvageable.

Anne Lamott says, *I just felt him sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I*

squinted my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with.

A week later Anne Lamott showed up at church, and in the singing of the people she said she felt like something was *rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling-- and it washed over me.*

She began to cry before the benediction, and as soon as the service was over, she raced home, opened the door to her house, stood there in the doorway a moment, hung her head, and finally, she took a deep breath and said out loud, *All right. You can come in.*

So this, Anne Lamott said, *was my beautiful moment of conversion.*

The same God who is king is the one who also declared himself the shepherd of his sheep. And that God, that Shepherd-King, is—Can you see him?—striding over the hillside, staff in hand, seeking the lost, bringing back the strayed, binding up the injured, strengthening the weak.

That's what Ezekiel saw. This is the vision that Ezekiel had. You know, I don't have a lot of convincing rational arguments today. It's just a vision. I just have this vision, this image, this reality, this thing that I have experienced and that I know and that I hold on to, and that is:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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