

Called to Thrive and Flourish 2023  
Ezekiel 34:1-2, 4, 11-12, 15-16, 23, 31 John 10:1-11

Ezekiel 34:1-2, 4, 11-12, 15-16, 23, 31 (New Revised Standard Version)

The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? 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. 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 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, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord God.

John 10:1-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The John passage is a continuation of a conflict & heated exchange  
between Jesus and some Pharisees that began earlier in chapter 9.

According to John’s Gospel Jesus said, (9:5), **I am the light of the world**,  
and then healed a man who’d been blind since birth, i.e. **he gave light**  
and some Pharisees were upset that it was done on the Sabbath.

When the man insists that his healing was a miracle, **a gift from God**,  
the Pharisees angrily object and drive him out of the synagogue.  
Then when Jesus hears about what the Pharisees have said and done,  
he accuses them, that they are the blind ones not seeing the light.

The passage we read today is a continuation of that same conflict.  
Jesus expands his argument by using allegory or word-pictures

that are drawn from the writings of Old Testament prophets.

Many of the OT prophets complained and warned and railed against the rulers & religious leaders of Israel who trampled the people with their harsh focus on human rules, traditions and rituals, including Amos, Hosea, Micah, Zechariah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, who all write about the failure of Israel's leaders to shepherd.

The prophet Ezekiel is another good example of that, who lived and wrote during the Babylonian exile, a time of discouraging defeat and seemingly hopelessly-lost future, which was the result of an absolute & total failure of leadership.

The people were suffering in exile primarily because both political and religious leaders had failed them. Ezekiel compared these failed leaders to faithless shepherds, whose flocks were now scattered and lost in the wilderness.

These false shepherds were entrusted by God with authority and power to provide for the sheep, to lead, protect and care for them, but instead, they had exploited and devoured the flock.

In God's economy, people are worth more than institutions or ritual and Israel's leaders were supposed to reflect those values of God.

The prophet explains that the people have been mis-led & mistreated, and according to Ezekiel, because the leaders failed so miserably, **God will personally take over to protect & care for his people.**

In Eze 34 God addresses their devastating situation of defeat & exile with words of hope and absolute assurance of grace and restoration, which read as a wonderful cascade or chain of "I will" promises.

Ezekiel describes the grace and good God's promises to accomplish.

Listen for how many times God says, **I will** in this passage, vs. 11~16

For thus says the Lord *GOD*: **I myself will search** for my sheep, and **will seek them out**. As shepherds seek out their flocks, their scattered sheep, so **I will seek** out my sheep. **I will rescue** them ... **I will feed** them ... **I will feed them** with good pasture ... **I myself will be** the shepherd of my sheep, says the Lord *GOD*. **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**.

In this Ezekiel passage, God is promising to seek out and rescue the lost who have wandered off and have messed up their lives, **by offering renewed hope and the possibility of restoration**, even to those who are justly suffering and enduring the consequences of their own dreadful decisions.

We know that sometimes we fail and foul things up in terrible ways, and often make wrong choices and some very foolish compromises.

We also know that our lives can get very messy, off and complicated,  
and at times we do and say things that we at least **ought to regret.**

But the truth and Good News is, that despite all of our sin & failure,  
we are still the precious and beloved sheep of God's pasture,  
who seeks and finds us even when it's our fault we got lost.

The amazing truth of God's grace is that the strayed & lost sheep  
have done nothing to earn, prompt or cause the Shepherd's search,  
other than managing to stray, getting lost and into trouble.

That means, the **how we got lost**, the details of **how we have strayed**,  
are not nearly as important as God's real & radical desire  
to seek the lost & struggling, to heal the broken & wounded.

When the passage we read from Ezekiel was originally written,  
Ezekiel's audience probably heard this as a *spiritual metaphor*,  
and certainly not expecting God to actually show up in person.  
It was not heard as God actually coming to lead like a human shepherd,  
**for obviously no god would ever do that sort of thing.**

But then some 600 years later, that promise given through Ezekiel  
was literally fulfilled with the life & mission of Jesus Christ.  
**John's point is that the Pharisees who are opposing Jesus  
are like those false leaders & bad shepherds of OT Israel.**

John's Gospel intends for the reader to understand  
that Jesus was sent as God had promised through the prophets,  
and that Jesus Christ came as the good and true shepherd.  
**That is the picture John presents of the life and mission of Jesus.**

Ezekiel predicted and described the life and ministry of Jesus,  
when God came in-person, in human flesh, to seek the lost,  
to restore the strayed, bind up the injured & strengthen the weak.  
**Jesus came to fulfill the "I will" promises of Ezekiel,  
finding us & healing our wounds, losses & brokenness.**

John's Gospel reveals the life, the purpose and mission of Jesus,  
who was sent by God as promised through the prophets, vs. 11, 14-15  
**I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.**  
**I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me  
and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.**

In this passage from John, Jesus identifies as **the Good Shepherd.**  
The word '**good**' can also be translated as authentic, ideal and true  
in contrast to something that is not authentic, good and true,  
such as the religious leaders who opposed Jesus & killed him.

**As the true and good shepherd, Jesus came to seek the lost,  
bind the wounds of the hurt & broken, welcome the outcast,**

and provide for the sheep under his care and compassion.

Drawing from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that we read as our Call to Worship today,  
as we walk through this life's valleys of darkness and despair,  
we're not afraid, alone or abandoned to our troubles & failures,  
**for the shepherd is close by who loves us with eternal care.**

And because the Holy Spirit-Shepherd is faithful and present,  
it is certain that we shall dwell in the house of Lord forever.

That is the true Gospel message of God's grace and compassion,  
the Good News by which we are saved into Jesus Christ,  
and the true message of God's grace that the Church  
is called and equipped to live out and proclaim...

**... which can only happen as we know and grow deeper in Christ,**  
in the healing of our broken human hearts and damaged lives,  
as we rest and refresh in the pasture of the Good Shepherd.

It is that truth of **God's endlessly-flowing fountain of grace**  
that continues to heal and bring hope into human lives today.  
But coming from our Western culture and my life experience,  
as I've explained before, I didn't appreciate what all that means  
not really, until I studied and traveled in the Middle East.

One time in an extremely remote & desolate part of the Sinai desert  
we stopped, got out to see some ancient Nabatean stone-writings.

Then seemingly out from nowhere  
a young Bedouin girl showed up with some trinkets to sell,  
along with a dozen scrawny little sheep trailing behind her.  
I was amazed that anything could survive in such a dry barren place,  
and I still can't imagine how she managed to keep her flock alive.

I noticed that whenever one of our group would move or speak,  
her little flock would be startled, afraid and even shake.  
But then she would cluck and her voice would soothe them by name,  
and they would visibly relax, calm and go back to their grazing.

There was an unmistakable and very special bond that they shared,  
while she kept a constant and close and attentive eye on them,  
as they followed her around like little puppies on a leash.

And in that incredibly harsh and fiercely foreboding environment  
those timid, trusting little sheep were entirely dependent on  
the protection, provision and presence of their shepherd girl.

Reflecting on young Bedouin shepherd girl's care for her sheep  
helped deepen and enrich my understanding and appreciation,  
of the relationship between sheep and the good shepherd  
that Jesus lived & fulfilled, vs. 3-5,

that John described,

... and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

**Jesus is the Good Shepherd who leads his sheep out to good pasture.**

They know his voice and they follow where he leads them.

Jesus further explains his ministry, mission and promise  
by presenting a related image, a Middle Eastern sheepfold.

A sheepfold was a circular enclosed area that was surrounded by  
a high stone wall with brambles & thorns stretched out along the top  
and so the only way in or out was through the gate or opening.

These sheepfolds normally had just an opening rather than a door,  
where generally the shepherds would sleep across the opening,  
so that nothing could go in or out without waking them first,  
which kept the sheep protected & feeling secure all night.

I believe the purpose of the Church is to be like that of a sheepfold.

We enter the sheepfold which provides security and a safe place.

BUT then we're also to pass back out through the gate  
into the abundance of greener pastures,  
as we follow our shepherd's call to serve in the world.

Our call is to be a safe sheepfold, ministering to each other,  
so that then we can go back out into the world  
for it's in serving that we thrive & live life abundantly.

**Jesus the Good Shepherd is also that opening or gate through which  
they pass in order to find & receive life in abundance, vs. 9-10.**

I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find  
pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it  
abundantly.

Notice, in contrast to the thief comes in to steal, kill and destroy,  
**Jesus came so that the sheep are secure to receive life in abundance.**

**But what do we mean by abundance?**

Abundance describes how the Lord provides overflowing grace,  
as a sign of God's love, God's promise and abiding presence.

My last Sunday at the New Church Development I served in NC,  
a concerned elder asked, "Are we going to make it and be OK?"  
I replied, "No. God is good. You are going to thrive and flourish!"

John selected this specific story to tell from the life of Jesus  
to make it clear that Jesus was sent by the Lord God and came  
in blessed fulfilment of God's promises through the OT prophets,  
**and that in contrast to the false leaders in opposition,**

**Jesus alone is the true shepherd as God had promised.**

The message was to stand fast, to trust and hope in God's promises,  
be faithful, and listen with due care and diligence  
to hear what the Good Shepherd might be saying to you,  
who provides for the sheep under his care & compassion,  
**for as the gate, he is the true way into God's Kingdom.**

The life, the meaning and purpose to which we are called  
is to follow the Good Shepherd and be a part of his flock,  
who blesses abundantly far beyond what we know to ask,  
**because in Jesus, God came to show us his unlimited & gracious love.**

As Jesus said, (John 10:10-11 NRSV)

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. For I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd (who) lays down his life for the sheep.

The True Shepherd sets before us promise & hope of his gracious love,  
where we remember and live into his grace, not just for our sake,  
but that we may reflect that love and spread God's grace  
out among our neighbors, friends and families,  
**as we follow our shepherd's call to serve the world,**  
for God's gracious love and promise to flow freely through us  
toward making a real difference in our world so much in need.

**So consider and reflect deeply and purposefully today,  
what does it mean for you and me to live and serve faithfully  
as a beloved sheep in the flock of the true and good Shepherd?**

As we're promised in Isaiah 40:10-11,

*See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*