

Christ, the Shepherd King: His Mission and Ours

Zechariah 11: 4-17 Matthew 25: 31-40

On this last Sunday of the church's liturgical calendar, we come to the fulfillment of the promise, Christ the King Sunday. Of course, the fulfillment of the sacred promise of God in time has a lot of variations in understanding. 'Thy Kingdom come' is what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer every week. But we probably don't have a great idea of what that means.

We're pretty sure that it has to do with finality, the end of all things, at least as we know it. God comes to earth, or Jesus comes to earth, saving it from dissolution while pronouncing judgment on the evil and establishing a reign of righteousness and truth. End of story.

We're familiar with the Revelation version of the fulfillment of the promise, the end of time and the apocalyptic judgment on the world. It's a big, hairy event in Revelation which has been a boon to the lazy creatives who want to do a movie or a book with lots of crazy stuff happening.

The whole "Left Behind" series is testimony to how a stupid idea based on idiotic and insubstantial theology can make you a fabulous fortune. You can even get Nicolas Cage to star in it. Okay, Nicolas Cage will (and has done) just about every kind of movie, including some of the most horrendous trash, presumably if the paycheck is green enough.

Yet we return again to the imagery of the shepherd, the one who watches the flock, protecting it and sustaining it. This shepherd theme is found throughout scripture, in Psalm 23 as well as John 10. We've dealt with this recently in Ezekiel 34. It's typical of the use of the shepherd image by the prophets. The shepherd is often referring to the king, and with the prophets, the shepherd is often chastised for failure in caring for the flock. In Ezekiel, God declared that God would deal with the shepherds who exploited the sheep rather than caring for them, and that God would become their shepherd.

The passage that we heard from Zechariah is similar. Zechariah poses a tale that has had scholars pulling their hair out trying to understand it. It begins by citing the problem, the shepherd selling the sheep for slaughter. The slaughter of the sheep is not foreordained. It is the shepherd acting as a hireling or contractor for the one who will slaughter the sheep. The sheep are treated as a commodity to be used for everyone's enrichment. This might be 'business as usual' depicted deliberately, but Zechariah makes 'business as usual' into God's distress and concern. The slaughterers receive no punishment and the selling shepherds congratulate themselves on a big payday, completely indifferent to the fate of the sheep.

God is fed up (leaving the sheep/shepherd metaphor behind for now); *I will no longer have pity on the people of the land. I will hand everyone over to his neighbor*

and his king. They will oppress the land, and I will not rescue them from their hands. God is going to let them all self-destruct, exploit each other and oppress each other to their sinful destiny.

This turning aside by God is not without precedent. The prophets recognized God's absence from his people in the Babylonian conquest, the destruction of Jerusalem and exile of the people from the Promised Land.

In verse 7, Zechariah assumes the role of shepherd. Note his particular interest in the oppressed of the flock. In his shepherd role, Zechariah introduces two staffs which are named Favor and Union (or Unity). He mentions having gotten rid of three shepherds, but no one knows what he is talking about here.

In fulfillment of what God had said before, the sheep detest the shepherd, so Zechariah leaves them to their self-destructive misery.

In doing so, he takes the staff named Favor and breaks it, revoking the covenant that would make God's people secure and at peace in the land. As God's people have dismissed any interest in God, God has now dismissed any interest in them. 'Let them try life without their God (again!) and see how they like it.'

Zechariah turns to the sheep merchants now, saying: *If you think it best, give me my pay, but if not, keep it.* Zechariah remains quite indifferent, but accepts 30 pieces of silver. Then God tells the prophet, *Throw it to the potter.* However, there are several textual problems with different words being used. The belief is that the 30 pieces of silver represented Zechariah's worth. It makes sense for him to give it to the Temple treasury, reflecting a practice of paying one's value in order to be freed from any further obligation. Zechariah certainly wants nothing more to do with this whole mess. (By the way, 30 pieces of silver may sound familiar as it was the amount received by Judas.)

With that business over, Zechariah proceeds to break the second staff called Unity or Union, representing the promise of reunifying Judah and Israel as one nation – now broken, a broken promise. The covenant between the people and the covenant between the nations are now fully broken. God has Zechariah essentially repeat playing the role of the foolish or worthless shepherd, the indifferent one who abandons them at the slaughter and profits handsomely by exploiting the sheep's trust.

The promise here is not fulfilled. Rather the covenant is dramatically broken and God walks away. In the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, the fulfillment of the promise meant the restoration of the people to peace and prosperity, and their identity as well as their nation restored by a Davidic king. The prophets hold out that promise amid times of exile and occupation. Zechariah gets frequent note for his depictions of one who comes from God, a Davidic successor, who is pierced and stricken, but through whom the people are cleansed of sin and impurity. Then God himself comes to reign in a creation bending cataclysm that re-establishes Jerusalem and its wealth and power.

We've gone a long way through Zechariah, and we did end up with a cataclysmic conquest by God who takes up and establishes his sovereignty over his creation. The shepherds were part of the lead-in, but were gone at the end.

In Matthew, Jesus is responding to what the Kingdom of heaven will be like, what signs should be watched for the end of the age and the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus has given several examples already, but in this selection, Jesus is something like a shepherd sorting through his flock.

The sheep on his right have been blessed. They're told to *take their inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world*. This is the big pay-off and we can imagine people are pretty excited to hear this from Jesus.

Then he tells them **why** they're receiving this blessing. *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*

This is rather confusing, even disturbing to those who are being blessed. Maybe there was some mistake. *Lord, when did we see you at any such time and minister to your needs?*

His reply: *Whatever you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did for me.* While the end of the age is depicted as a sorting out, the terms of the sorting are noteworthy. It is not determined by what denomination, or even what religion, or by membership, or by saying anything in particular that would make you right with the Lord. It is so much simpler than any of the things we've come up with.

In the sorting out, we discover that ministry to those in need, a heart of compassion, a spirit of mercy, a desire for healing are the things that really matter in the Kingdom of God. To bring hope and new life is the true witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.

If we go one step further, we can look at how Jesus responded to this kind of question about the coming of the Kingdom in the gospel of Luke [17:20-21]. There Jesus says: *The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you [or within you].*

Jesus takes us one step further in Luke's version, saying that the Kingdom of God is lived by the faithful. It isn't a thing coming in the future, a cataclysmic event or an apocalypse; it is among you when you witness to the love, healing, and new life that is acting in Jesus' name. It is within each believer waiting to be released in the moment when a sister or brother in need is discovered and compassion is brought forth from a faithful spirit.

As we conclude this liturgical journey from promise to fulfillment, we find that the promise is fulfilled not by some outward or external event brought about by God. It is rather the faithful work of ministry with the spirit of Jesus that reveals the Kingdom of God, established at creation within the human spirit. It is a promise brought to fulfillment by the new life of faith that is committed to service, to sharing, to sacrifice, and to making the broken whole. Indeed, we are to be like the shepherd among the little ones, the least of these, who brings grace, generosity, justice, and peace in Jesus' name.

Our witness as a congregation this year has been challenged several times in different ways, and we have grown in new directions in our ministry together, in our ministry in Jesus' name. We have done more, blessed more, healed more, and brought hope in more ways. Our work and our challenges are not complete; more await. May we rejoice today in the promise of God that has been fulfilled in us, the incarnation of the Kingdom, the best celebration of Christ our King. We begin a new journey next Sunday, the same kind of journey, but starting in a new and blessed place to glorify the Lord with a loving and compassionate spirit.