

“The Selfless Shepherd”

Introduction: “We want to be like everyone else!” So echoes the cry of children, who want to have a cell phone just like their friends do. So echoes the cry of those who look up at airplanes and watch people flying off to what they believe must be exotic places, while they go back to mowing lawns or directing traffic or pushing the stroller. So echoes the cry of those renting apartments, who think it would be great to own a home, just like their neighbors do. So echoed the cry of the Israelites, during the period known as the Judges, the three hundred year or so period after the Israelites had settled in the Promised Land following God’s dramatic rescue of them from slavery in Egypt. “Appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have,” they cried out to Samuel (1 Sam. 8:5). In some ways, who could blame them? Samuel’s sons, who were leading Israel at the time, were a crooked pair: “They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice” (1 Sam. 8:3). And it wasn’t the first time the Israelites had been led by such rascals. So, they wanted not just a new leader, but a change in the by-laws. A monarchy, a king, would be just the thing. It’s what all the other nations had; why couldn’t they have one too?

Well, in his wisdom, as he sometimes does, God gave them what they wanted, but he warned them that it wouldn’t be all they had hoped for. The rest of 1 Samuel 8 in fact describes how a king would take their kids to serve him, take the best of their fields and vineyards to support him, and take the best of their animals to sustain him. “You yourselves will become his slaves,” God’s warning ends. But they didn’t care. They wanted to be like everyone else.

I begin this morning by taking us back this cry of the Israelites because in Ezekiel 34 we have described for us, some 450 years later, the end result of this cry for a king. The people had lost their homes, their land, their Temple, and were now living in exile in Babylon. While the people were not entirely innocent, as we have seen in recent weeks, God here lays their fate largely at the feet of their selfish and self-serving leaders, or kings, as the metaphor “shepherd” describes. The problem was not really that Israel had asked for a king; the problem is that her kings wound up being like everyone else’s. If God has called his people to be different than those who live around them, and not like everyone else, for his good and glorious purposes, then we need follow the good, Selfless Shepherd, who is Jesus.

I. Slick and Slimy Shepherds (vv. 1-6)

A. The opening paragraph describes for us some rather slick and slimy shepherds, kings who (as God had warned in 1 Samuel) had been taking care of themselves and not their flock, leaders who had not been using their office as an opportunity for service but for personal gain. They had not been strengthening the weak, or healing the sick, or binding up the injured, or bringing back the strays, or searching for the lost. No thought, in other words, was given to the poor, or the homeless, or the unemployed, or the immigrant. Instead, these kings had been ruling harshly and brutally with an eye toward what they could get for themselves. The numbers bear this out as you make your way through the books of Samuel and Kings. Looking back over this period of the monarchy, from 1051-586 B.C., Doug Stewart, one of my former OT professors, identifies only 3 kings out of 43 who were solidly loyal to God throughout their reign, and another 8 or 9 who managed to do some good. This leaves over 30, nearly 75%, who were flat out rascals!

B. The phrase “to rule brutally” (v. 4) deserves a word here. It is found in only two other places in the OT. The first describes the way the Egyptians treated their Hebrew slaves (Ex. 1:13-14). The second is in God’s law where an Israelite is forbidden to treat a fellow Israelite in this manner (Lev. 25:43, 46). God thus accuses the rulers of Israel of doing what their own history should have taught them to abhor, and what his law expressly forbade them to do.

C. By way of contrast, listen to how Peter describes the way leaders in a church are to “rule”:

Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing...; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. [1 Peter 5:2-3]

Notice the “nots” of selfless, truly shepherd-like leadership. Not feeling forced but being willing, not getting what you can but eager to serve, not taking advantage of but being an example. Israel had experienced very little of that kind of leadership. As a result, God’s people had been plundered and now found themselves scattered into exile.

II. The Response of the Ultimate Shepherd-King (vv. 7-24)

A. Because of this dereliction of duty by Israel’s shepherds, the Lord declares that he’s going to begin impeachment proceedings, against the whole lot of them! They would no longer be able to use their office to serve themselves. As a part of this process, the Lord himself promised to look after his sheep. He will rescue them and gather them in, bringing them back from their exile. He will care for them, giving particular attention to the economically and politically exploited. And he will tend the flock with justice, protecting the vulnerable against those who would try to abuse or take advantage of them.

B. How would all of this be accomplished? Ultimately, it would take place through the sending of the Lord’s servant, David. Now, this is strange at first blush because at this point, King David was long dead. But, going back to our friend Samuel once again, we see contained there one of the great covenants of the Bible, the covenant God makes with David. It is summed up this way: “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever,” God promises (2 Sam. 7:16). How does that happen? Hear the familiar words of the angel to Mary, who was married to Joseph, identified in the opening of Luke’s gospel as a descendant of David. The angel reveals the following: “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end” (Lk. 1:26-33). Jesus would be the fulfillment of God’s promise to have his servant David—one from David’s lineage—placed over the flock.

C. In contrast to Israel’s shepherds, this shepherd, Jesus, would be a selfless shepherd. He would come to give and not to take, to serve and not to be served. He would come to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. He would come to seek out and to save those who were lost. He would come to bring justice, separating the sheep from the goats. He would come not to rile up the crowds but to feed them, body and spirit. Summing it all up, as recorded in John’s gospel, Jesus would declare: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11). The good shepherd is a selfless shepherd. The problem was not that Israel had asked for a king; the problem was that she had asked for a king like the other nations. But the king she needed, the king the world needs, is a king like God himself.

III. Following the Road to Peace (vv. 25-31)

A. As God's words through Ezekiel to the community in exile continue, we hear of the cosmic peace that will ultimately result through the restoration of order and justice that this Davidic ruler will bring. It's not just the absence of hostility, but a positive state of incredible harmony and abundance, a state where there is absolutely nothing to fear. Just listen to its tones:

²⁵ I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of savage beasts so that they may live in the wilderness and sleep in the forests in safety. ²⁶ I will make them and the places surrounding my hill a blessing. I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing. ²⁷ The trees will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in their land. They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them. ²⁸ They will no longer be plundered by the nations, nor will wild animals devour them. They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid. ²⁹ I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations. ³⁰ Then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them and that they, the Israelites, are my people, declares the Sovereign LORD. ³¹ You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD.

The fullness and blessings of this new age won't happen all at once, nor will they happen fully until this shepherd, Jesus, returns. But we do get glimpses, especially as we take this shepherd up on his invitation, "Follow me," and begin to live and love others in the selfless way that he has lived and loves us.

In this regard, I appreciate a prayer found in the Heidelberg Catechism (a 16th c. confession of faith) which speaks of God's persistence in carrying out his purposes, and his call on us to live differently from those around us in order to participate in his mission to the world (HC35):

Faithful God, you made an extravagant promise to David and kept it through generations of rebellion and failure, until you sent your Son as David's true descendant. Keep us from ever thinking that we can build your kingdom by our programs or efforts, but call us to live out of the kingdom you have built in the death and resurrection of the son of David, Jesus Christ our Lord.

How do we live out of the death and resurrection of Jesus? How different are we to be? Our faith is focused on a cross, an ancient form of execution, on which we believe someone needed to die for us. We hold that the one who died on this cross is God in the flesh and has spoken the truth we need for life and freedom. To that end, we're called to pick up our crosses and die to ourselves. In the process, we seek to practice a love that is sacrificial in nature, one that even extends to our enemies and those who persecute us. Ultimately, we believe that without the resurrection into new life, both now and into the future, our faith will be in vain. That's different!

To be sure, there is discomfort in being different, but it is both for our sake, and for the sake of the world. As one writer has put it, it is the differentness of the gospel, not its hipness, that changes lives and transforms the world (Brett McCracken, *Uncomfortable*). Jesus is the only leader we should truly follow and the only one against whom the leaders of our world should be measured. So, selfless shepherd, Jesus our Savior, lead us in your life-giving way, and help us to follow.