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Ezekiel 34:1-6, 11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

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If you think churches should stay out of politics, you are not well-acquainted with the Bible. The Bible gets very political. Recently a friend sent me a quote by the well-known Southern preacher and activist, the Rev. William Barber. Barber states that, "Preachers don't get to stay out of politics. We are either chaplains of empire or prophets of God." I would add that preachers don't get to stay out of politics because the Bible doesn't stay out of politics, because *God* doesn't stay out of politics.

Both of today's scripture passages reveal this truth. At a basic level, politics is about who is in power and how they use that power. And this is the topic of both of our scriptures today: who is in power and how they use that power.

It is clear from the Ezekiel passage that the people in power in the prophet Ezekiel's day were not using that power very well. The Ezekiel passage is an indictment of bad leaders. Bad leaders seem to plague people down through the centuries. Israel's kings are symbolized as shepherds by the prophet Ezekiel--that was a common metaphor back then for kings and leaders. As shepherds of God's people, they were supposed to care for God's people as a good shepherd would care for the flock--to feed, to care, to protect, to think of the welfare of the sheep. But Ezekiel paints a very different picture of the shepherds of Israel. Ezekiel writes about God's indictment of these leaders: "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."

Bad leaders, that's what this passage is about--bad leaders abusing their power to advance themselves, to benefit themselves. We've seen such leaders in our day, for sure. We are living in an acute leadership crisis. We have a leader who trades lies for truth when convenient, who sows division and fear, whose harsh rhetoric endangers the welfare of the entire planet. We have other leaders who abuse their positions of power for personal financial gain or sexual pleasure, who pursue policies that will further enrich the wealthy, who deny scientific facts like climate change because they think it will hurt them financially, and who lack the courage to stand up and speak out against other leaders whose behaviors and policies are clearly harmful to our nation and its stability. Maybe we can hear God's words directed toward the leaders of our land today: "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 then Ezekiel goes on to critique not just the kings and leaders but other members of the "flock," other members of society who act selfishly and unjustly to ensure they get all of life's benefits for themselves. Ezekiel gives us a picture of big fat sheep pushing and shoving little scrawny sheep out of the way to get to the food and to strut their power. God states, "Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep."

The news then from Ezekiel is that God is going to intervene. God will come with judgment against the leaders and their injustice. And God will come and install a new king, a new shepherd over the flock. God lays out the plan: "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd." This Shepherd

King will exercise power and leadership as God intends: seeking the lost, bringing back the strayed, binding up the injured, strengthening the weak, feeding the hungry.

When the early Christians read this Ezekiel passage from their scriptures, they instantly recognized Jesus as the Shepherd King. Jesus, who was born from the house of David, Jesus who they had seen care about the lost, the weak, the hungry, the injured. Christians read Ezekiel and they saw it describing the man they knew to be the Messiah, the King. King was not just a spiritual title for Jesus. It wasn't just that Jesus was "king" of their hearts. Jesus was the Shepherd King who used his power to care and act on behalf of the least and forgotten and ignored and hungry, who would bring justice and judgment against those who had abused the weak.

And we don't just have to take Ezekiel's word for it. We have Jesus' own words. In today's reading from Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells the parable about the day of judgment when the Son of God will judge the people. And like a shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats, the Shepherd King will divide people based on how they treated the world's disadvantaged. "The king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you . . . 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.'" And those people who did not care for these needy and disadvantaged people, those who failed to act with compassion and care and justice, will according to Jesus' parable be harshly judged. The Shepherd says to them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did *not* do it to one of the least of these, you did *not* do it to me." Significant judgment is levied against those who prey upon

the weak, against those who consume the world's resources for themselves, against those who step upon the weak for their own gain, against those who ignore the suffering of others.

The truth that emerges from both of our scripture passages today is that Jesus takes sides. Jesus takes sides. The Shepherd King sides with the weak, with the diseased, with the marginalized, with the damaged. And he uses his power to care for the least of the world's people.

Today on Christ the King Sunday, we remember that this feature is what defines the King we worship and follow--a king of compassion and justice. This king stands in stark contrast to leaders of our world, to the powerful people in our society and how and for whom they use their power. We stop to recall the nature of Christ our King because in understanding who Jesus is and how he uses his power, we will understand who we are called to be and how each of us is to use our power.

When Jesus says in his parable: "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," these sound like words we could all get behind. But it sometimes is a more challenging matter when we begin to put flesh to these words, faces to these words, when we confront these words in our real lives. Sometimes it gets a little harder to live these words out. Who might these words be to us today? Who are the hungry today? We might see them in the people who come to our food pantry, or in lower income children who are often offered a diet filled with cheap junk food but lacking in more expensive healthy alternatives. The stranger in need of being welcomed today might be the refugee in need of a new country, or the undocumented person in our country, or the gay or lesbian or transgendered person. The sick today might be the person addicted to opioids.

The imprisoned Jesus calls us to care about are the disproportionately incarcerated people of color who make up 56% of the U.S. prison population.

These are the people Jesus sides with. It is among these people where you will find Christ the King--caring, feeding, clothing, seeking, welcoming, visiting, loving. And I know, I know he is looking to find you and me doing this work right along beside him.