

Drew Dyck writes a humor page for *Christianity Today* and last week he wrote: Something hard happened to me this week. Something harrowing. I got stuck in a line for 20 minutes with no phone and no reading material. And I survived. At one point I almost had to talk to someone. Getting caught somewhere without access to some form of distracting entertainment seems to be a particularly wrenching experience for people these days. It makes me grateful for church. Because in addition to worshipping God and fellowshiping with real live human beings, we surrender our little digital distraction machines for an hour or two. Except for those of you who sneak peeks at your phones during church. You know who you are...and so does God. Funny, if it weren't true.

The prophets of the O.T. wrote things that were funny if it weren't so true. Ezekiel's prophecy, in our own times, could sound like an expose of a self-serving televangelist who takes advantage of his unsuspecting flock. Status, prestige, unchallenged authority and power blindly given to spiritual leaders are sharply rejected by the prophet, as it should be. The 34th chapter of Ezekiel also has a common usage as a text for ordination services. But that does not convey its fuller meaning. Besides speaking against a corrupt priesthood and calling for reform in religious institutions, Ezekiel sets forth a far more enduring vision. He envisions a time to come when such institutions and offices will be abolished altogether, a time when God will directly and immediately act as the faithful Shepherd of his people. This new time is like that described by Jeremiah the prophet who spoke of a time when the law would be written on people's hearts; when no one will need to advise "*Know the Lord,*" because they will all know God in a direct, immediate sense.

Ezekiel's vision has another twist in the latter part of the passage, God is not the faithful shepherd named. But he says, "*I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd*" (v. 23). David, the king, remembered as the shepherd boy who came to the throne with God's blessing, becomes Ezekiel's ideal image of the faithful shepherd. Christian interpreters have usually identified Ezekiel's faithful Shepherd as Jesus Christ, the second David, the perfect Son of God. After all, he said of himself, "*I am the good Shepherd*" (John 10:11). Is it any wonder then that we read this prophecy on the last Sunday in the church calendar—Christ the King Sunday?

Charles Osgood of CBS Morning News said, "Babies are always more trouble than you thought—and more wonderful than you expect." We usually assume that parents think their children are simply wonderful. Those of us that *are* parents know there is another side to the story, except for grandchildren who are always simply wonderful, of course. We can think about sheep in this way. We usually assume that the shepherd has an entire flock of wonderful, compliant sheep. But if we recall for a moment a few lines from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm we will see just how tough the job of a shepherd really is.

For instance, sheep apparently aren't smart enough to know when they need rest. So the shepherd *makes* them to lie down. Anyone here today who might not know when to quit? If so, what you need is a shepherd. All of us need water to sustain our life, as sheep do, so the shepherd leads his sheep to the water that keeps them alive. People can't always recognize when they are thirsty, which is why people sometimes get dehydrated. Talk to any medical professional and they will tell you how deadly serious dehydration can be.

Then comes a line in Psalm 23 that brings the shepherd's real contribution into focus: "*He restores my soul,*" which actually comes as a result of the green pastures and the still waters. They are the way in which God restores our souls. And if we stop long enough to let God care for us, we'll soon discover that our souls really do need restoring. The literal translation of "*He restores my soul.*" is "*He causes my life to return.*" The word *restore* means to replenish, to *return to its original state*. Restoring my soul means God keeps me going and gives the enjoyment of life back to me. Notice it's not random or nonspecific—what he restores is my *soul*.

The Hebrew term *nephesh* in Psalm 23 can be translated into various English words: *soul, life, heart, or mind*. *Nephesh* is the word used in Genesis 2:7 to describe what happened when God breathed into the clay figure he had made: "*The man became a living creature [or nephesh].*" The central thing that is most human about us, so the Bible suggests, is our soul. Our soul is what relates us to God our Maker. So, if God continually "*restores my soul,*" how does he do it? The psalm already told us how: "*He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.*"

Did you know that merely being near a body of water has a therapeutic benefit? In a *Huffington Post* article titled, "Why Being Near The Ocean Can Make You Calmer And More Creative," Carolyn Gregoire notes that, "Since ancient times, humans have assigned healing and transformational properties to water. In early Rome, baths were an important part of cultural life, a place where citizens went to find relaxation and to connect with others in a calming setting. . . Rivers have long been seen as sacred places, and in a number of different spiritual contexts, water has symbolized rebirth, spiritual cleansing and salvation.

Today, we still turn to water for a sense of calm and clarity. We spend our vacations on the beach or at the lake; get exercise and enjoyment from water sports like surfing, scuba diving, sailing, and swimming; refresh ourselves with long showers and soothing baths, and often build our lives and homes around being near the water. Our affinity for water is even reflected in the near-universal attraction to the color blue. We're naturally drawn to aquatic hues—" ([https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2016/02/25/mental-benefits-water\\_n\\_5791024.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2016/02/25/mental-benefits-water_n_5791024.html)).

The good Shepherd leads beside the still waters. Ezekiel 34:18 asks, "*Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?*" We have probably distorted this passage in ways that should be straightened out in two areas: 1) A call for pastoral leaders who are faithful shepherds. This is obviously not a bad idea at all, but not what the passage is mainly about. And, 2) A reading of this passage with Jesus as the faithful shepherd, appropriate for Christ the King Sunday, but, again, not really what the prophet wanted us to take away from this passage.

What then is this vision of the faithful shepherd all about? First of all it is a warning about what can happen to religious institutions and offices that claim to speak for God and mediate divine grace. Also, it is a promise that God alone is the faithful Shepherd, and that faithful shepherding means doing it like God does, with both compassion and justice.

The first warning does not mean that some religious leaders and institutions are bad and corrupt, while others are good and faithful. Rather, in the exercise of their respective roles, pastors, priests, prophets, bishops, congregations, dioceses, conferences, synods, presbyteries and assemblies, and all other such religious structures are *both* mediators of and impediments to the divine-human relationship.

In being a church, and in being a pastor, to narrow it down to the experience I am most familiar with, all church leaders inevitably risk standing in the way of God, rather than standing in the place of God on earth, as they were called to do. We inevitably point to ourselves, not to Christ on the cross. We inevitably confuse our own ideas and initiatives with the call of the Holy Spirit. The inevitability of becoming faithless shepherds arises from the fact that we live between the times of God's divine revelation and God's divine completion.

Ezekiel's words remind us that while we are called to be faithful shepherds (both pastors and churches), we will never quite measure up. We will *always* get in the way. That should not cause us to give up, but instead to be truly modest in what we claim; to acknowledge that we have *some* truth that we have apprehended from God's word, but not *all* truth. Bottom line is: We could be wrong. Such modesty frees us all to be all the more passionate and joyful about the gospel message and its life of service. We don't need to wait until we have it all figured out, or until we unequivocally know the truth of God. Waiting might seem modest, but it denies that measure of God's grace that has already been given to us. If we wait for perfection we'll be waiting forever.

The second characteristic of the faithful Shepherd in Ezekiel's vision is the blending of compassion and justice. Ezekiel states the needed balance in this way: *"I will search for the lost, and I will bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice"* (v. 16). What a wonderful phrase, *"shepherd the flock with justice."* Other translations say *"I will feed them with justice."* That makes me think of the Shepherd giving us a good stiff dose of castor oil: It tastes awful, but it's good for us and restores the sheep.

How hard it is for the church, for any congregation, for any pastor, to balance compassion and justice as God does. We often veer off in the direction of becoming a compassionate and caring church. Or, we become so obsessed with campaigning for God's justice that we totally forget to feed the hungry and care for the sick among us. It's not an either/or. It's a both/and.

In the end, Ezekiel's vision of the faithful Shepherd is a reminder that all of us who serve as earthly shepherds are only temporarily entrusted with that role. In God's own time and in God's own way, there will be a restoration of the "in person" divine Shepherd, rendering all our institutions and pastoral vocations obsolete. That's a tough message for a preacher like me to hear. We pastor-types like to think that churches are part of God's eternal plan. I can guarantee that most of my colleagues in Pittsburgh Presbytery do not think of our calling as a provisional expression of God's people that gets eliminated when the rightful Shepherd of the sheep comes to care for the flock.

Where would people be without us? Where would the church be without pastors? Where would the world be without the church?

It's one of those funny if it weren't true situations, because I think I know the answer to my questions. Where would any of us be? "In the loving arms of God our Savior." That's where we would be.

What more could we want or need? Amen.