

Old Testament lesson – Ezekiel 34:1-24
New Testament lesson – John 10:1-16

The Hireling

For those of you who farm, what would you do if the government, or perhaps even a foreign power, swooped in and simply took your land and your equipment away from you, seized your bank accounts, and then said, “We are going to re-locate you to another place?” Would you continue to farm in the new location? How could you with no equipment and no financial assets with which to buy land or equipment? You would probably be forced to figure out another way to make a living. I’ll come back to this scenario a little later.

Our OT lesson should be taken as somewhat of a parable, rather than a literal explanation, describing the cause of Israel’s captivity. Speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, God is not addressing those Israelites who were actual keepers of sheep. Rather, he is speaking first to the leaders of Israel who had the responsibility of caring for the people. So we don’t want to think literally about the leaders personally feeding the people, binding up broken limbs, or curing the sick. These shepherds included the king and his subordinates who governed the land, plus the priests and Levites, and the council of elders, who were responsible for the religious life of the people.

All these had failed to carry out their responsibilities properly. They had abused their positions of power and authority to make themselves rich. They had allowed worship of the LORD and other religious practices to become corrupted. They had relied on human means and methods to keep Israel safe and secure, rather than depending on God.

As the late-night commercials used to say, but wait, there’s more. God also has some harsh words for some of the sheep. Some of them were taking advantage of their positions to oppress other sheep. God continues in a metaphorical vein, talking about how some of the sheep trample down pasture that others need for food, and muddy the waters others need to drink. I don’t know exactly what practices this refers to,

but it is clear that some of the more ordinary citizens of Israel, non-leaders, were at least rich enough to use their wealth to oppress others who were less successful financially. This was not in keeping with the Law, and God expressed his displeasure at this sinful way of living.

And so, God presented them with a judgement and a promise or two.

He is going to judge the shepherds, and he is also going to judge between sheep and sheep. The date of this writing is not definitely known, but it seems at least to be after the nation has been sent into exile. That was the judgement against the shepherds and wealthier Israelites, many of whom were the ones who were actually removed from the land.

As for the two promises, God says he will seek out and restore the sheep who have been scattered. In addition, God himself would be their shepherd, and his servant David would be prince among them.

Well, that is a perfect segue into our NT lesson. There, Jesus declares himself to be the very shepherd described in Ezekiel 34. He also offers some criticism of Israel’s shepherds as God did through the prophet.

Jesus actually uses a couple of figures to describe himself. He is the door of the sheep, because his sheep will enter the kingdom of God through Jesus himself. But he is also the good shepherd, who will go so far as to lay down his life for the sheep, thus opening the door, which is also Jesus.

All who came before him, he tells his disciples, were thieves and robbers. It seems clear that Ezekiel would have agreed with that characterization. Of course, you can probably look at any nation or people group and find that in most cases, there are some leaders who take advantage of their positions of power to use and misuse people and to make themselves rich. I could list recent examples in our own nation, but

I probably should keep the worship service under two hours.

Israel was supposed to be different. In Exodus 19, God told the people of Israel, “*you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*” Not only were their priests and other leaders supposed to show exemplary behavior in obeying the Law, but *everyone* was supposed to be as a priest before the LORD. The entire nation was supposed to be holy. But the leaders led them astray, as Jesus reminds his hearers. They were all thieves and robbers.

Jesus, and only Jesus, is the good shepherd. Anyone else acting as a shepherd does not own the sheep. The sheep belong to Jesus. The best a shepherd can hope to be is a hireling. As a pastor, which is another name for shepherd, the best I can hope to be is a hireling.

That means the sheep are not going to listen to my voice. That may be good or bad. A lot of cults and misguided churches have been the result of sheep listening to the words of a hireling shepherd that did not agree with the words of Jesus. But a lot of churches have also gone under for not listening to words that agreed with Jesus, and also for listening to words that did not agree with Jesus.

What’s a hireling to do? For myself, my most fervent hope when I preach is that what I say will meet the test of being in agreement with the words of Scripture. If I am successful in that, it will not matter whether I am applauded or insulted, praised or rejected. I don’t work for the sheep; I work for their owner. You pay me a bit of wool, but I’m not trying to fleece you.

But if my words agree with those of Jesus, it matters greatly to the sheep whether they obey the words of Jesus. It matters greatly to the sheep if they disobey the words of Jesus. In this regard, the hireling is also a sheep who belongs to Jesus.

Now, back to that matter of having your farms and equipment taken from you and being relocated. In the time of Ezekiel, Israel was like every other nation in one important way: it was an agrarian society. Most people were farmers of

some sort. That’s why the parable of shepherds worked for Ezekiel; everyone had some knowledge of that way of life, even if they lived in a city. Today, that isn’t true. If you tell a person in a city that all the farms in America are in danger of failing, they might not worry, because we have so many grocery stores to provide food.

When Israel and Judah were conquered and carried away into captivity, they had to make some serious adaptations in the way they lived. And that was not the only time. They were conquered several more times, and finally, their rebellions against Roman rule from 66 A.D. to 136 A.D. resulted in their dispersal beyond their homeland. They lost that homeland until 1948, when the Holocaust finally motivated the world to grant the Jews a homeland again. Of course, they had to fight for it, because the Muslims had no intention of letting the Jews back into their ancient home.

I have mentioned before the fact that the constant, repetitive persecution of the Jews forced them to adapt. They emphasized education and skills in high demand, such as medicine and law, they accumulated their wealth in portable forms such as diamonds and precious metals, and they emphasized family and religion. The persecution of the world forced them to do these things for their own survival, and then the world continued to persecute them because they were educated, successful, wealthier than most, and were closely knit. People resented the very things they had forced the Jews to become.

Would you be able to adapt this way if you were uprooted from your land and from your homes? It’s a question everyone should ask whenever they hear of antisemitic attacks that occur. Could I adapt under persecution as well as the Jewish people have done?

Now I want to say something as your hireling. I can’t guarantee that these are the words of Jesus, but I think they are worth considering.

In 1979 I met an elderly Jewish woman in New York City. She had come to America around

1905. Her family left Russia because of the pogroms. Twelve years later, the Russian Revolution turned Russia into an officially atheist communist country.

In 1933, the Nazis began persecuting Jews in Germany. The world was silent, refusing to accept Jewish refugees trying to escape the economic and social persecution that was threatening them. The world's blind eyes were finally opened when Allied soldiers liberated the death camps in 1945, and people could no longer deny the truth that had been staring them in the face for a good ten years.

When God called Abram in Genesis 12, he told him, "*I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse.*" The Jews serve the world as a coal mine canary. When you see someone blessing them, things will go well. But when people curse them, things can go south very quickly. The Soviet Union is gone. Nazi Germany is gone. I hope the anti-Jewish regime in Iran will soon be permanently and completely gone.

But now, if you pay attention, many American universities are becoming rabidly anti-Jewish. Politicians are becoming vocally anti-Israel and quietly anti anti-Jewish. People are supporting values that contradict the Judaeo-Christian values on which Western civilization is built.

Thus, we hear people talk about the culture wars. I tell you, there is no such thing. What we have on our hands is a spiritual war. The thief is at work in our nation and in our world, seeking to steal, kill, and destroy. And while the work of politicians and so-called cultural warriors may be important, the victory, if there is to be one, will be brought about by seemingly insignificant people who pray.

When I say pray, I don't mean "now I lay me down to sleep" prayers. I don't mean "God bless Mommy and Daddy and Uncle Jimmy" or other childhood prayers. I don't mean memorized prayers like mealtime grace or even the Lord's prayer. I am talking about prayer from the heart, from the gut, fervent, aggressive prayer for a

defeat of the forces that threaten people, places and things that deserve protection from the thief and his allies, witting or unwitting.

There is no doubt in my mind that the increase of anti-Jewish sentiment in our nation and in our world is a harbinger of evil that is loose and seeking to grow in our land and in the world. The thief is here. The wolf is here. And they are one and the same as the serpent in the garden of Eden. The devil wears many disguises. Paul told the Corinthians that Satan even disguises himself as an angel of light.

In these various attractive disguises, he whispers things in our ears that sound good. Don't talk in public about God or Jesus – you might offend someone. You work hard, you deserve to sleep in on Sunday morning. You don't have time to pray. Your spouse doesn't want to spend time praying with you; you can do that alone. Besides, your favorite TV show is on. Real men don't pray with other men. You don't really want that person in your church; they wouldn't fit in.

Sometimes, we become so used to the lies, they seem like our own idea. Or the lies are so common, we think of them as a cultural value.

There are times when I consider the stupidity of people's words and actions, of their determination to take away any chance of freedom and prosperity that people might have, and I am tempted to think we are witnessing cultural wars. That, in turn, tempts me to think it must eventually lead to a violent confrontation. If I am attentive to the Holy Spirit, I realize that is not the way God wants me to handle this, nor is it the way he wants his Church to handle the presence of the thieving wolf in our midst. If we think we are fighting to defend a Christian culture, we might want to try *having* a Christian culture first.

People think America is a Christian nation, and we live in a Christian culture. Not true. Our economy runs on greed and covetousness, our political system on self-interest. Neither is a Christian value.

Or consider the Church. What does church mean to people? It's a building. If you push someone, they'll admit that it's actually the people who go that building. So where does the word come from?

Surprisingly, perhaps, the word church actually comes from a two-word Greek term, "kyriakon doma," meaning the Lord's house. From Greek it went to kirche in German and Kirk in Scottish and church in English. But in the NT, there was no such structure or term. The NT word we translate as "church" is the Greek word ἐκκλησία, (ekklēsia) which literally means "the ones who are called out." It refers to Christians, the Church, as people who are called out of the world and its ways, its culture. A Christian culture would be quite different from anything you can find in this world, even American culture. We have some traces of it, but only here and there.

Now, don't misunderstand me on this point. I love America, and I think it is the best country in the world for a number of reasons. I would not want to live permanently anywhere else. But there is no country anywhere that has a truly Christian culture. And that includes ours.

I don't consider myself a doom and gloom person. But I think the coal mine canary of Jew hatred is a warning that something bad is coming. It is time to take action.

If you believe the warning of current events, you might want to buy more guns or ammunition. I won't tell you not to. I am not a perfect Christian, and I might do that myself.

But the instructions from God's Word tell us to pray in these circumstances. The word of God tells us to fight the fight spiritually, because we

are wrestling against powers and principalities in the heavenly places. We are fighting against the thief himself, and guns and ammunition are powerless.

It is time to pray more. Husbands and wives, pray together, not just alone. Parents, pray with your children. If they are very young, "Now I lay me down to sleep" and "God bless Mommy and Daddy" are a great place to start. With older kids, make prayer a matter of the heart and mind. If you live alone, find someone to pray with, in person or on the phone.

I have said before that the men ought to try to get together and pray during the week. The rain and wet ground gave you some opportunity to do that. Did you recognize God's hand and take advantage of it?

During planting and harvest seasons, will you make a point of being in worship every week? It's an hour, plus travel time. "Oh, but I have to get cleaned up." No, you don't. God doesn't mind at all when a man shows up for worship smelling of sweat and diesel fuel. If you're worried about the smell bothering someone, sit down here in front.

Jesus said that when the hireling who doesn't own the sheep sees the wolf coming, he flees and leaves them to the wolf. I'm a hireling. But I am also a sheep. I need to be with sheep who can discern the cultural values whispered in our ears by the thief, and then reject those values. Is that you? I need to know that the sheep here will listen to the voice of the good shepherd. I really need to know that the sheep here take prayer as seriously as we need to.

There is a lot more to say, but that's probably enough for now. Amen.