

Christ, the King of the Ragamuffins – Ben Wayman

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

Long ago in a far away country a king grew tired of his court jester and sentenced him to death. The jester pleaded with the king to give him one year and he'd teach his horse to talk. The king was amused and because he liked to own unusual things, he granted the jester his request.

Later a friend of the jester said to him: "Why did you make such a rash promise? You know no one has ever taught a horse to talk." But the jester replied, "A lot can happen in a year. (1) The King may die; (2) I may die; (3) The horse may die; (4) The horse may talk. In any event, I live one more year."

The problem with kings like the one in this story is that they aren't good enough to handle the power of their position. I love it that it's a court jester who points this out.

Our Old Testament lesson today is about God's response to kings who have misused their power. Just a few verses before our reading, these bad kings are identified as the "shepherds of Israel."

The problem with these shepherds is they've used their power for themselves and not for the good of their sheep. Ezekiel gives the specifics: "you do not feed the sheep. ⁴You 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." Not only are the shepherds of Israel guilty of neglecting God's sheep, but also of mistreating them.

The Bible often refers to kings or other leaders as shepherds. And it's not just a biblical way of speaking; it was common in the ancient Near East to call the king "shepherd." Such "shepherds," be they leaders of Israel or leaders of Bablyon, were to protect and care for the people. God's judgment of Israel's leaders is that they have used their positions for themselves – to amass wealth and land and luxury, while they have neglected the basic needs of the people.

Ezekiel explains that it is because of these bad kings, these bad shepherds, that Israel was in exile. In verses 5 and 6, Ezekiel states that these leaders caused God's people to be ⁵"scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. [He goes on,] ⁶My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them."

And so God sets himself against these pseudo-shepherds. Their abuse and neglect of God's people has resulted in Exile, Oppression, Sickness, Injury, and Hunger. In verse 16 of our reading today, it's these leaders that are the object of God's destruction. That they're fat and strong exposes their injustice and God promises to put an end to that.

If you're having a hard time with all of this talk of Kings and Shepherds, I don't blame you. The Bible and its cultures can sometimes seem very distant. After all, Ezekiel lived more than 2500 years ago. To help us understand what's at stake in our lessons today, I thought Tom Petty's song, "It's Good to Be King," might clarify things a bit.

In his daydream of being king, Petty helps us see what's wrong with the shepherds of Israel. He sings:

It's good to be king and have your own way
Get a feeling of peace at the end of the day
And when your bulldog barks and your canary sings
You're out there with winners, yeah, it's good to be king

In one verse, Tom Petty describes for us what it means to be a bad king: 1) bad kings get their own way, and 2) bad kings hang out with winners. The kings of Israel could have just as easily written the lyrics to this song.

I'd like to make two observations about kings who get their own way and are always "out there with winners."

First, you don't have to be a king to get your own way. Any time any one of us decides to live our life as though it belonged to us, we are acting as bad kings. Getting our own way means doing something with only ourselves in mind. This is why raising our kids to think for themselves is one of the worst things we can do for them. We want them to think like Jesus, not like themselves. Our lives belong to God. It only makes sense that we learn to live and think like God.

A second observation about kings is that like bad kings we can also be drawn toward winners. But this is not how God is. In fact, God prefers losers over winners. Jesus hung out with the sick and the lame, the tax collectors and the prostitutes – the perennial losers of his culture. In fact, there is nothing about Jesus' life or ministry that would suggest he was even liked by the "winners." It was the winners, after all, who sentenced him to death and nailed him to a tree.

So here's what we can take this morning from our talk on kings: kings can refer to: 1) the shepherds of Israel and 2) they can refer to you and me – when we insist on our own way and prefer the company of popular people.

In God's response to bad kings we see the most peculiar thing. People tend to focus on the judgment the bad kings receive – the bit on being destroyed and getting fed justice. Similarly, people tend to focus on this in our Gospel lesson – how the sheep are separated from the goats. God's judgment is real, to be sure, but this isn't the critical point of our lessons today.

So what's peculiar about God's response and what is the central point of our readings this morning is that God's chief concern is to rescue his sheep. In our lesson from Ezekiel, we see God himself searching for and seeking out his sheep. God's concern for his sheep's rescue is so deep that he will leave the job to no one else. God's actions here are the exact opposite of the bad kings of Israel. In fact, what we see God doing in verse 16 is the mirror image of what Israel's leaders fail to do in verse 4. God's own way is always for others; and God prefers the losers, not the winners.

Clearly, God is not your typical king. He has no vices that can overpower his virtues; only God has the goodness to match his infinite power. And God himself has showed up as King in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Shepherd that Ezekiel promised to come from David's line.

If you hear nothing else this morning, hear this: Christ the King deeply loves you and wants nothing more than to rescue you.

Whether you are lost because you've never had someone show you the way;

Whether you have strayed because you've never had someone take an interest in you;

Whether you are injured because you've been hurt by someone you thought cared about you;

Whether you are weakened because you're exhausted by life...

Christ the King is seeking you out to rescue you.

From Ezekiel we learn that God wants to lead you to a place of rest and peace and protection. God is delighted in you and wants to bring you home. He wants to heal your deepest pains and disappointments and rescue you from bad kings. God wants to rescue you from yourself.

When we understand that God wants nothing more than to rescue us for friendship with him, we can begin to understand Matthew 25 as good news and not an unbearable burden.

I mentioned earlier that it is common to read this passage in Matthew as judgment rather than grace. Here the risen Christ returns to bring God's people home. On the surface, it appears that God's kingdom is for people who have earned it. Feeding the hungry, relieving the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting the prisoner. It can read like an overwhelming To-Do-List.

But this passage from Matthew is more about God's grace than his judgment because no one knew that in doing or failing to do these deeds they were doing them or failing to do them to Christ. Neither the sheep nor the goats. Everyone is surprised that Christ is the person in need. This surprise suggests that obedience is not the main point. The main point, rather, is **where God's kingdom is to be found.**

Here's how Ezekiel helps us understand what's going on. God rescues us for friendship with him by teaching us to be like him. God is the true Shepherd and the Good King. When we feed the hungry and care for the sick and visit the prisoner we do what God does. This is what the righteous sheep have done in the parable. They've learned to think and act like God.

But there's more to it. It's not just about thinking and acting like God; it's about being with God every day. When we welcome the stranger, or relieve the thirsty, or clothe the naked we do this to God because this is how God chose to be for us in Christ and how he chooses to be for us in the world. When we keep company with broken people we keep company with God.

Just as Jesus won the world by losing his life to it, when we forfeit the game of the world we take company with Christ. Jesus is found where the winners wouldn't be caught dead.

The gospel is a radical reversal of everything you would come up with on your own. It's not about being a starter on the basketball team or head of your class or professor of the year or employee of the month. It's about learning how to live with people who have been left out, kicked down and pushed aside.

As we learn how to live as people who have forfeited the world, we begin to think and live as God's friends. The common characteristic of God's friends is this: they all know they need to be rescued from the kingdoms of this world.

This is what Brennan Manning calls the Ragamuffin Gospel. The gospel is for ragamuffins – for people who have been rescued by God due to nothing they have done.

I'd like to close with Manning's words because I think he truthfully describes what it means to belong to a people who have been rescued by Christ the King from the pseudo-kings of this world.

The Ragamuffin Gospel is

“for the bedraggled, beat-up, and burnt-out.

It is for the sorely burdened who are still shifting the heavy suitcase from one hand to the other.

It is for the wobbly and weak-kneed who know they don't have it all together ...

It is for the inconsistent, unsteady disciples whose cheese is falling off their cracker.

It is for the poor, weak, sinful men and women with hereditary faults and limited talents.

It is for earthen vessels who shuffle along on feet of clay.

It is for the bent and the bruised who feel that their lives are a grave disappointment to God.

It is for smart people who know they are stupid and honest disciples who admit they are scalawags.”[\[1\]](#)

Christ keeps company with ragamuffins. The only thing keeping us from friendship with God is realizing we’re those ragamuffins and accepting that God loves us anyway.

[\[1\]](#) Brennan Manning, Ragamuffin Gospel (Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2000), 15.