

2020 Ez 34 Sheep

I spent a little while skimming over all of the, nearly, 200 usages of “sheep” in the Bible. If you are looking for a way to spend your afternoon, I highly recommend it! I wonder how scholars did it before search functions... I’ll spoil one observation I got out of it, though. I found that pretty much every time sheep are spoken of, they are passive. They aren’t acting, they are being acted upon. They aren’t doing the verbs, the verbs are being done to them. Sheep are like a dingy in the ocean, moved around without any say in the matter.

Sheep at various times in the Bible are sold or traded to another owner, without any say in the matter. They are brought in and sheered, then led along to pasture. They are hunted by lions, or picked to be the sacrifice, and they can’t do a thing about it. They are scattered or sought out. They are fed or mistreated. They are imitated by wolves and, in general, at the mercy of seemingly everything else and forces beyond their control.

This is just about universally true. And perhaps, in a world where so many things are so out of control, we can relate. That being said, there are a few instances where sheep actually *do something*. I suggest we might learn something from these exceptions. Here’s one: the sheep actively stray. Whether out of ignorance or stubborn pride the sheep wander. I think this is a reminder for us to keep our eyes

on the Good Shepherd and guard our hearts from apathy and meandering down dark paths that lead away from Him.

But there is another exception that I want to focus on, and we find it in our Old Testament lesson today. Here we see sheep actually doing something. Verses 20 and 21: “Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad.” Who is doing the shoving and oppression? The sheep! The fat ones specifically. They are actively harming their fellow sheep so that the weak cannot satisfy their needs or find rest.

This is quite the aberration. This is unheard of in the Bible. Not only is it rare for sheep to do something actively, it’s even more rare for the Sheep in the Good Pastures of the Lord to do something like this. We have trouble in paradise! We have sheep of the flock fighting amongst themselves. This shouldn’t be! In every illustration in the Bible once you get in the Good Shepherd’s sheep pen, you are good to go, nothing more needs be said. But here we are in Ezekiel and there is discord.

Let’s be clear, the sheep pen in Ezekiel is not the saints in heaven, there is no sin and discord there. It is an image of the Church here on earth. There is discord and

disunity here, and it should not be! Make no mistake, the Shepherd will make it right. Judgment will come upon these fat, proud, and selfish sheep. And why shouldn't it? Shoving and goring certainly doesn't sound like the will of the Good Shepherd or behavior befitting his flock.

In fact, I wonder if it's fair to ask: can we call a spade a spade? Are these sheep who are so unmerciful, are they even a part of the flock? Are they sheep at all, or goats? Goats are a subtly different species and our lectionary did us a disservice I think, cutting out verse 17 where the Lord says, "As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: Behold, I judge between the sheep and sheep, between the rams and male *goats*." Because maybe all these sheep that appear to be a part of the Lord's flock... aren't.

This is a warning for us in the Church to be mindful that this Church stuff is not just lip service. The rolls in the office are not the book of life in heaven.

Sometimes we talk about the visible and invisible Church. The visible is the people in the pews, the invisible is the people with faith in Jesus wherever they are. I think that is helpful here, there are some goats in the pews somewhere in the world, the fat sheep oppressing others. And on judgment day the shepherd will sort them out. But keep in mind: that is His job, not yours. So before we start picking out who we think the goats might be in our lives, perhaps some self-reflection is in order.

Have we ever shoved with side or shoulder? Have we ever been unmerciful because we were too busy, too scared, too greedy, or just didn't care? Have we ever sought personal gain from the sheep and congregation? People used to go to Church for social status, not anymore. Now you probably lose social status being a member, and on my bolder days I like that just fine. It shows that those who come usually do so because they believe what is confessed. But that doesn't mean we are immune to pride. Have we sought our plan, our vision, even if it causes discord, strife, or pushes another aside? Is that worth it? Paul in 1 Cor 6 seems to say, "no." And so the Lord judges between the sheep and sheep, rams and goats.

And the proud will respond as they do in the gospel lesson, "Why do you think us unmerciful? Surely not me!" Answer, "Yes you, because you showed no mercy. So why do you expect mercy from the Shepherd?" The child thinks it's funny to see someone else get teased, or crash their bike. Yet they aren't self-aware enough to acknowledge we know the pain that comes along with humiliation or a busted knee. Are we adults much better? And so we vilify those who disagree with us, we are blind to our presuppositions, we show little compromise, and we think everyone needs a little common sense - except us of course! And we shove with side and shoulder. We deserve to be among the goats.

But just as we are not to judge others as goats, lets not be so quick to despair and think ourselves goats without hope. Because lets not overlook the fact that there is

a visible element even to the invisible Church. Do you find the invisible Church (true believers) confessing faith in a false god? No! Do you generally find them in mosques or in Churches? Churches that proclaim Christ crucified and risen! Do you find them, as Ezekiel notes, being unrepentantly unmerciful or do you find them at least trying to follow the Good Shepherd, Jesus', words – confessing and looking for mercy when they wander? Yes. That is what sheep do.

The Bible supports this. Sheep actively do just two other things in the Bible. Now's a good time to hear them, I think. Sheep actively "hear the voice of the Good Shepherd," and they "follow Him." Those are the last two things a sheep actively does in the whole Bible, at least that I saw. And so even with temptations to wander and stray, even with pride, grudges, and bitterness seeking to dictate their actions, the Sheep, by the power of the Holy Spirit, hear the voice of Good Shepherd rise above the cacophony of worldly calls and cries. And again, thanks be to God, they follow where he leads, because they recognize he leads to mercy, courage, and joy. Yes, sheep can listen to the Word of God and they can follow, even if through suffering or a valley of the shadow of death, because the sheep trusts, has faith that, the Good Shepherd, and knows the Good shepherd only has the sheep's good in mind.

And he does have your good in mind. Ezekiel is clear who will watch over the Sheep. God will, the "I" action statements are emphatic, God is underscoring the

fact that He alone will be at work saving the sheep. Yet then at the end of our reading he says David will do it? David's dead already when Ezekiel is writing. How is he going to watch over the sheep if he's dead and when God said He was going to? Unless a Shepherd like David, greater than David, who is the Son of David but also true God is raised up! So Jesus the Messiah, Son of David, and true God will be the Good Shepherd.

And as the Good Shepherd he will lay down his life for the sheep. He was shoved, punched, lied to, trampled, and killed. And he deserved none of it. He was bold to stand for the truth, but merciful to those in need. He was faithful to the very end, and deserved more than a sheep pen, but the Kingdom! Yet he went to the cross, to cleanse us of our selfish, sinful pride and unmerciful, bitter, hearts. He washes us clean that on the judgment day we need not fear that we will be among the goats, because all our evil is taken and judged already in Him. So all that is left is those times, however many or few, that we actively gave clothing, food, and drink.

Make no mistake, we are still saved by grace through faith. For the Son of David is the one who actively gave his life for you, took it up again, and actively works for your good. And we can be confident of our salvation because we have passively received his goodness in faith. Faith hears the words, "You are forgiven and an heir of eternal life," and simply, passively, receives them – believes them. Faith hears, "Take eat, take drink," and receives the goodness of God. Faith celebrates

that the Water and name of God is upon us in our baptisms and says, “I didn’t do much of anything, but God did.”

God is active in saving you and keeping you in His flock. You the sheep are passive recipients of his goodness. I do, however, think it’s fair to ask: how does a sheep respond to this goodness of God? By, as the scriptures remind us: hearing and following. Hearing his word of guidance (law) and grace (Gospel). And following him into works of mercy for those in and outside of the sheep pen. May the Good Shepherd actively grant us grace to do so. In His name. Amen.