

# “Constituency of the Sheep and the Goat”

Ezekiel 34:11-16, Matthew 25:31-46

**Leah Fowler, 11/20/11**

Today holds significance for many reasons. It is the Sunday before Thanksgiving. It is also, in a sense, New Year’s Eve because next Sunday the new year in the church begins with Advent, the 4 weeks of preparation and waiting before Christmas. And finally, today the ecumenical church celebrates Christ the King Sunday. Please join me in diving into *The Bible* to examine what Christ the King image the word presents to us today.

In Ezekiel, we do not see fine royal regalia, a mighty sword, or a mighty political force. The Lord is the Shepherd: I will seek out. I will rescue. I will bring them to their own land. I will feed them. I will make them lie down. I will seek the lost. I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, I will strengthen the weak. I will feed them with justice. I will judge, and I will save. Even when the reading continues in verse 23 with the promise that God will set over them one shepherd from the house of David to be prince among them, that ruler’s role is to be their shepherd and again to feed the people.

It was not until much later that Christians appropriated this and other prophecies to story of Jesus’ coming.

By contrast, in Matthew we see a reversal, and a story even more humble than that of the good shepherd. . Instead of the Lord as the one who feeds, offers drink, welcomes, clothes, cares for and visits, we see that instead *we as the sheep* are the ones who are called to do such things. And if we do not, we are goats.

Here are two perspectives on Jesus’ role and on our role. And both are true. That is why I chose the bulletin cover for today. If you look at the cover, you can interpret the man—possibly Jesus—as looking from the perspective of imprisonment and oppression, looking out... or you could see him as from the outside, looking in on us, the captives to oppression.

Some of you might cringe at the judgment of Jesus’ words in Matthew, particularly those at his left hand, the ones whom, when Jesus passed in the guise of a stranger, failed to feed him, offer drink and clothing, or visit. For those goats on his left, Jesus calls them the accursed, and basically tells them to “Go to hell!” It seems a harsh judgment, particularly for those who did not sin directly: they did not steal money; they did not abuse children; they did not murder. No: their sin was the sin of doing nothing.

Judgment is often a stumbling block on peoples’ pathway to God. We are glad to follow a God who is loving and kind, forgiving and at our side. And God is all these things. We also want a God who agrees with us—and when presented with a God

that has an opinion and even a consequence on what we do—well, *God should mind God's own business and let me follow my truth!* But before we judge Jesus for being judgmental, let us look at what point in his life Jesus speaks these words. These verses come as part of a sermon Jesus gave to the disciples, on the Mount of Olives. It was two days before the Passover—just a few days before Jesus' death. Jesus knows he will physically depart from the disciples, but he wants them to understand that he will still be with them, particularly embodied in the poor and oppressed. These final words of Jesus needed to make a serious imprint on the mission of the followers of Jesus. It was not time to mince words or to tread lightly. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in an Advent sermon in 1928, said “The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.”

We also see judgment at the beginning of Ezekiel 34, an indictment of the kingship of Israel. “Ah, you shepherds who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not 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.” As a result, the sheep have been scattered and “have become food for wild animals,” “with no one to search or seek for them.” (Ezk 34: 1-6). Walter Brueggemann draws a connection between the kingship of Ezekiel's Israel and the current state of our economy and politics. When we approach our current situation in the context of faith, Brueggemann says “It is not enough to recite, in pious tones, the twenty-third Psalm about “The Lord is my shepherd.” What is envisioned (and required) is the formation of a different leadership that has in purview all members of the community. Ezekiel knew *that* is the only way to have a future that does not replicate the failed past.”<sup>1</sup>

So are we as constituents, sheep and hopefully not goats, charged to feed, lead and free? Or are we charged to *be* fed led and freed? Yes! Both!! For in doing one, we receive the grace of the other. Hear this story, which is one that has been repeated often but does not have a definite source:<sup>2</sup>

*There was once a monastery that was considered quite great. However, over time it lost support, declined in men called to be monks, and its funding dwindled to the point that even its walls crumbled. Clearly it was a dying order.*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.odysseynetworks.org/news/2011/11/20/on-scripture-ezekiel-3411-16-20-24-christ-the-king-sunday> On Scripture Blog, “Failed Kings and the Good Shepherd” by Walter Brueggemann, Oct. 20 2011

<sup>2</sup> Carl Greg's worship blog quotes this story, which he says he found from M. Scott Peck, who says the story has no definite source. But to see the story I copied, go to: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2011/11/four-spiritual-practices-for-preaching-on-matthew-25-a-progressive-christian-lectionary-commentary-on-mt-25-for-nov-20-2011/>

*In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a hermitage. As the abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to visit the hermitage and ask if by some possible chance the hermit could offer any advice that might save the monastery.*

*The hermit welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the hermit could only commiserate with him: "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in all the nearby towns. So the old abbot and the hermit commiserated together. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the hermit responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."*

*When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the hermit say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just commiserated and read the scriptures together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving — it was something cryptic — was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."*

*In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered these words and wondered whether there was any possible significance. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one?*

*Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.*

*On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.*

*Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the hermit did mean Brother Elred.*

*But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.*

*Of course the hermit didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?*

*As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.*

*Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.*

*Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the hermit's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.*

On this Christ the King Sunday, may we be reminded that the Messiah is in our midst. Try it out at Thanksgiving with your relatives, even your most difficult ones. Then take the practice to work, to the streets, to anyplace that is in need of good news. See how this practice changes you. See how this practice changes the world. Amen.