

What Would Jesus Occupy?

A sermon preached by Pastor Beth Lyon at Glenside UCC on November 20, 2011, Christ the King Sunday. Texts: Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24 and Matthew 25: 31-46.

What would Ezekiel occupy? You can be sure he would occupy something. Ezekiel saw strange visions and heard the voice of God. He would fit right in among the homeless and mentally ill that make up part of the Dilworth Plaza contingent. And like the more politically minded of the Occupiers, he was also known for his street theater.

Consider this passage, where God tells Ezekiel:

Now, son of man, take a sharp sword and use it as a straight razor, shaving your head and your beard. Then, using a set of balancing scales, divide the hair into thirds. When the days of the siege are over, take one-third of the hair and burn it inside the city. Take another third, chop it into bits with the sword and sprinkle it around the city. The final third you'll throw to the wind. Then I'll go after them with a sword. Retrieve a few of the hairs and slip them into your pocket. Take some of them and throw them into the fire—burn them up. From them, fire will spread to the whole family of Israel.

This is what God, the Master, says: This means Jerusalem. The Message

The first part of the book of Ezekiel was written when he was taken as an exile to Babylon. He was a priest, but he was a priest without a Temple in which to perform his sacrificial duties. So he took to preaching. He preached about God's judgement on the people of Judah for their unfaithfulness to God's ways. After the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and God's judgement was complete, Ezekiel preached about God's love and faithfulness and the hope of future restoration through the power of God.

In the passage we heard this morning you can hear both the judgement and the hope. In the verses that come before this passage, Ezekiel says that Judah has come to this terrible place in their history because they've had some lousy leadership. The bible often uses the metaphor of a shepherd to mean a king:

"God, the Master, says: Doom to you shepherds of Israel, feeding your own mouths! Aren't shepherds supposed to feed sheep? You drink the milk, you make clothes from the wool, you roast the lambs, but you don't feed the sheep. You don't build up the weak ones, don't heal the sick, don't doctor the injured, don't go after the strays, don't look for the lost. You bully and badger them. And now they're scattered every which way because there was no shepherd—scattered and easy pickings for wolves and coyotes. Scattered—my sheep!—exposed and vulnerable across mountains and hills. My sheep scattered all over the world, and no one out looking for them!"

Doom to you - because you have not looked out for the 99% (alright - that part isn't in there). But it does say: "the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep." I could not make this stuff up if I tried. As my Old Testament professor was fond of saying "It's in your Bible!!" And it just happens to be the lectionary passage assigned for today.

After that, God says that God will be the people's new shepherd. God will shepherd them right. God will take care of the most vulnerable sheep, the lost ones, the hungry ones, the ones who need medical care and have not had it.

Then Ezekiel's prophesy takes another turn. God is going to send a human ruler to carry out God's rule. We hear this lesson of Christ the King Sunday, because the church has always seen this promised ruler as Jesus. Jesus is the new king. who sought out the lost and forgotten, who forgave, saved, healed, and fed the people. . . He gave up his life for the sheep without a thought for himself.

So how does this relate to our situation here today? Here's what one modern day prophet, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has to say:

"There is no doubt that our society is now governed by an oligarchy of the wealthy who not only control all the branches of government but who have established an alliance between corporate power and government oversight to the great benefit of the wealthy and the powerful. Thus tax law, regulatory agencies, and judicial decisions are all administered by the "fat and strong" to their own benefit and to the neglect of the "hungry sheep" who are without resources.

There is no doubt, moreover, that such self-aggrandizing leadership has created the socio-political, economic crisis now before us. . .The current discussion about taxes is all about protecting the wealth of those who shrug off any responsibility for society, while shifting that burden to those with fewer resources. The protection of such wealth echoes the ancient shepherds who disregarded the sheep, the ancient kings who did not notice the coming "hell in a hand-basket." If Ezekiel were among us now, he might well conclude that the emergence of the "99%" is a scourge from God that intends to expose and bring down social policies, practices, and institutions that are out of sync with God's will for shalom."¹

It's not about political parties - about Republicans or Democrats. The Supreme Court has said that corporations are people and that they are entitled to all the free speech that money can buy. We have ever more costly elections in this country and they are

¹I am indebted through out this sermon to the commentary on Ezekiel of Walter Brueggemann on the web site ON Scripture

financed with corporate money. We recently experienced the most costly campaign in our history for the office of County Commissioner here in Montgomery County. In some communities even the elections for seats on the local school boards (which don't even pay a salary!) are running in to tens of thousands of dollars. The lean sheep don't have a chance.

So what would Jesus occupy? You may be offended by that question. But Jesus saw himself as the prophets' heir. We call him prophet, priest and king. He wasn't above a little street theater. That's what Palm Sunday was about. Instead of the conquering king entering the city on a war horse, we came riding on a donkey - the Prince of Peace foretold by the prophets. We've made it into a sweet procession with children. He was making a point, a dangerous point.

And come to think of it, he did occupy something. Do you remember the story of the "cleansing of the Temple?" That was another piece of street theater. It was symbolic action. In the last week of his life on earth Jesus made a whip of cords and drove out the money changers and turned over the tables of those selling the doves and the lambs for sacrifices. The Temple was a center of power. The way Matthew, Mark and Luke tell it, it was the last straw. If he had done that at Bank of America our government would have arrested him too.

And he is our King. We are his followers. And in this time between his coming and his coming again to sit on his throne with all his angels around him, we are charged with carrying out his work:

Seek the lost
Bring back the strayed
Bind up the injured
Strengthen the weak
Feed them with justice.

Charity is good and important and necessary. But it is not enough. Ezekiel understood that we need leadership that will seek the common good and not simply its own good at the expense of others. Fixing the mess we are in as a nation, getting from here to there is an enormous task. I'll leave you with these words from the Talmud:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.