

Worship Service – November 22, 2020 (Reign of Christ Sunday)

First Congregational UCC, Eagle River

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Sermon

- I. The prophet Ezekiel lived during the exile of his people in Judah, who were overtaken by the Babylonians and sent into captivity.
 - a. As a prophet, he interpreted this crisis and prophesied about all the ways his people had sinned, especially by worshiping foreign gods, and how God was punishing them by destroying their nation;
 - b. But like most prophets, Ezekiel also held out hope that his people could restore their relationship with God and be gathered back into a united and prosperous nation again.
 - c. In this section of chapter 34, the prophet addresses the people in allegorical language, as shepherds and sheep; leaders and followers;
 - i. God calls Himself the Shepherd and promises that under godly leadership, two things will happen:
 1. The good shepherd leader will give **care** – he will gather people from where they've been scattered; feed them, let them rest, seek out the lost sheep, bind the wounds of the injured, and strengthen the weak
 - a. At our farm, these are all basic animal husbandry tasks my husband does for his herd, as you saw in the earlier video.
 2. But also, the shepherd/leader will execute **Justice** – he will “*judge between sheep and sheep, rams and goats*”; he will stop those who hurt and abuse from exploiting others.
- II. The language of Ezekiel is poignant to us right now;
 - a. We are longing to be gathered again!
 - b. we are hungry for leaders to save us!
 - c. We want good shepherds to be in charge, tell us what to do, how to stop the virus, how to be safe, get food on our tables, get back to work, get along with our neighbors...
 - d. Who will unite us and comfort us and bind up our injured nation?
 - e. And we need *more than* comfort and care;
 - f. We need justice; this year has exposed the way some people are more vulnerable than others because of inequalities: race or poverty:
 - g. We've revealed weaknesses in our public health system, people at risk of being evicted from housing, workers unprotected from infection at their workplaces;
 - h. We've realized that Covid-19 is not the only virus we're dealing with: racism is a virus too. Hate has become more visible as people blame each other for hard times: *sheep against sheep*;

- III. We want to believe that people like presidents, Congress, Supreme Court will protect us and enact policies that unite us and lift us out of hate and poverty and pandemic.
 - a. But if anything, this year has shown us that leaders are not always equipped to do what we expect of them.
 - b. In pandemic, our leaders have not been able to access protective gear fast enough, or deliver widespread testing or do contact tracing as some other nation's leaders have been able to.
 - c. Our divided Congress hasn't been able to deliver on as much legislation as we would like to help us.

- IV. Ezekiel saw a lot of bad kings come and go; he was disgusted with the “shepherds” of his own time, like we are with some of our leaders!
 - a. Like us, he lived in a time that felt leaderless!
 - b. And yet, he never stopped having visions of a return to peace and shalom because he believed a higher authority was still at work; that God would call
 - c. people to be reunited in their homelands
 - d. that wise, gentle leaders who would rise up, more like shepherds than tyrants
 - e. believed in *shalom*: a time when everyone would have enough
 - f. Believed God was really in charge, and would send a good shepherd leader again!

- V. We think of Jesus Christ as being that promised Messiah;
 - a. But Jesus did more than promise his own reign of peace where he would be in charge and fix everything.
 - b. He unleashed the power of the Holy Spirit, giving all of us a greater capacity to be the leaders we dream of.

- VI. This is the week of Thanksgiving. Instead of dwelling on the leadership vacuum we've been languishing in for awhile, let's consider the leadership we *have* seen rise up in this past year, by the Holy Spirit's power:
 - When the pandemic hit, medical workers stepped up and improvised, often at their own risk and without enough protective gear; some gave their lives doing this; they were servant leaders and now our own hospital workers are doing the same thing.
 - Essential workers all over the country kept going to work during lock-downs;
 - they deliver food, drive buses, shop for your groceries,
 - scientists are working 18 hour days developing new treatments and vaccines,
 - meatpackers packing your meat, dentists cleaning your teeth and barbers cutting your hair and teaching your kids.
 - They've had to be innovative, flexible and courageous just doing their ordinary jobs so the rest of us can stay home and be safe. They are servant leaders.
 - Consider those who are demonstrating in places where people of color have been killed in altercations with police; or showing up at City Council meetings to work on police reform: the courage and leadership to say enough is enough, there is something wrong with the way our nation is executing justice on the streets.
 - Some of these people are prophetic leaders who have been working in their neighborhoods for years, but who we now see and hear for the first time,

- Think of police and firefighters and first responders who have had to walk into heartbreaking situations, whether it's sick people or violent, angry people or hungry people – they are front line leaders for us.
- What about those elected officials who are doing their job? Those civil servants and health department staff and tribal elders and school boards and mayors and governors who have had to make excruciating decisions about who will get what resources?
- And small businesses that have put their own money on the line to keep the economy limping along, keeping your Wall Street here in town pretty and appealing.
- And our non-profit leaders, adjusting their services and programs to reach out to people who cannot come to them anymore.
- Think about your own church leaders who have seen you through this difficult year of staff changes and pandemic adjustments.
- Even kids have stepped up. I heard a great story about an 8 year old girl who walked around her neighborhood to every house at the beginning of the pandemic and said to her neighbors, "Let me know if I can help you in any way." Then, a few weeks later after George Floyd was killed, she went to her mom and said, "We need to go visit the neighbors again and see if everyone is okay."

All these people have names and faces and get up in the morning deciding whether and how they will lead in their communities.

- VII. Thanksgiving is this week; and today, as we recognize the servant leadership of prophets like Jesus and Ezekiel, it seems like a good time to give thanks for the extraordinary leadership of individuals around us in the past year;
- a. We all want someone to tell us what to do in this crisis
 - b. But some have not waited for that: they just stepped up and figured it out day by day, making mistakes, correcting and adjusting and making the best of a hard situation.
 - c. You might be among them.
 - d. I hope you will remember and give thanks for these shepherd leaders around us: the way they've united us, fed us, bound our wounds, healed and comforted us.
 - e. Find a way to thank someone for their leadership: a teacher or health care worker or elected official or grocery store clerk or your boss at work. Send someone a note; leave a tip for your mail carrier. Say thank you to your legislator.
 - f. Thank God for the incredible leadership we've seen this year!
 - g. And then look around: who are **you** called to shepherd?
 - h. How can you unite and gather (by Zoom?) your estranged family members?
 - i. Who needs your gifts of healing?
 - j. Who could use a meal brought over?
 - k. Who needs to hear your voice speaking up for justice in an unjust situation?
 - l. Don't wait to be asked. Don't wait for someone else to be elected. Be the leader Christ equipped you to be; use the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.