

“I Will Feed Them With Good Pasture”

Ezekiel 34:11-24
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During the Confirmation year, we work hard at naming images of God that capture our experience of God. This is part of the self-differentiating process, claiming images of God that are our own and not of our parents. We take a look at hymn number 11 in the New Century Hymnal, “Bring Many Names,” and we see how Brian Wren has named five colorful images of God that arise out of his experience with the sacred:

Strong Mother God
Warm Father God
Old Aching God
Young, Growing God
Great Living God.

It is a helpful exercise for all of us to undertake from time to time, to reflect on how it is we have experienced the divine and then to name that experience with a metaphor or a simile or an image.

The Prophet Ezekiel offers us a very strong image of God as a good shepherd who sees how far a field the sheep have wandered, and sets out to find each one and to bring each one home. This is a God who will not rest until all the sheep are safely in the pasture, safely in the coral. This is a God who cares deeply about each person, who values each soul. No matter how far a person has drifted off course, the God Ezekiel knows is like a Coast Guard cruiser who hears an SOS alarm and sails the coastal waters until the wayward ship is safely back in Noank Harbor.

Of course, Ezekiel lived at a time when his country had been invaded by Babylonians and the people had been carted off into exiled slavery beyond the Tigris and the Euphrates River valleys. They were scattered like dandelions gone to seed on a windy day. They were scattered like children playing a game of tag, far out of sight of the one who is IT. In the midst of this time of utter chaos, Ezekiel raises up the image of God as a persistent shepherd who will not rest until the last one is home again.

I have been e-mailing with Michael Hawley who is serving with the U.S. Army in Iraq. Michael grew up at South Church, went through Confirmation, participated in all the mission trips, invited his friends to do the same. He has sent a number of photos so I can picture him in that wilderness setting. Before he left, we had a heart to heart, man to man talk. He told me about his worst fears. And I told him about a God who would shepherd him home.

I've been on the phone with Lynn, a recovering alcoholic. She recently received her pin for one and a half years of sobriety. She lives out in the northwest corner of our state. She tells me how far away her bottle of vodka had taken her from her family and her friends and her career. I tell her about a God who has never forgotten her and who will not rest until she is restored to health and dignity and self-respect. I tell her about the Great Shepherd God.

I have been talking with several members of our church who are fighting courageous battles with cancer. I have been imagining the cancer cells scattering to various parts of the anatomy, and I have been praying for the Great Shepherd God to round up every one of those cells and to contain them and to have authority over them, and not to rest until every cancer cell is confined and harmless.

As I lived with this text over these past many days, I began to get in touch with my own, inner scatteredness. I began to appreciate, in a personal way, Ezekiel's image of the Great Shepherd who does not rest until all the worry is put to bed, until all the anxiety is safely grazing in green pastures. I wondered if this Great Shepherd God has a phone number or a FAX number or perhaps an e-mail address. I wanted to invite the Great Shepherd God into my own inner pasture. For sometimes it's the inner scatteredness to which the shepherd attends. And that is the image of God I have been using in my morning prayers.

As Ezekiel develops this image of God as Great Shepherd, he sees how the compassionate shepherd occasionally gets irritated. Though our romanticized image of the shepherd is laced with adjectives like soothing, calming, healing, rescuing, guiding, nurturing, feeding; Ezekiel's shepherd sometimes becomes irritated. What irritates the shepherd is the evidence that some of the sheep have grown fat at the expense of others. Some of the sheep have grown hefty by elbowing their way to the food, ignoring the hunger of the others. Some of the sheep have grown healthy by drinking the clear, cool water; but then muddying up the pools of water for the others to drink fouled water. The shepherd grows irritated and is wearied by the greed of the few.

For Ezekiel, the same God who shows compassion to the exiled ones, to those living on the fringe, this same God has no tolerance for the ones who show no compassion, who feast sumptuously while being totally unconscious of the hunger around them. Ezekiel's shepherd spoke mightily to those in authority in his day, and speaks mightily to those in authority in this day.

Today, I am thankful for a Great Shepherd God who is still speaking. I am thankful for you, O Great Shepherd God, you who seek out each child who is at risk, you who seek out each young person who is really struggling with self-esteem, you who seek out every adult who is in mid-life crisis, you who seek out every elder who questions why she is still living, you who seek out every church that is struggling for an identity. O Great Shepherd God, I thank you for not resting until we all have found their rest in thee.

This reflection is my gift to you on this Thanksgiving Sunday, in the greatest of hope. Amen!