

“Just Between Us Sheep” / Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-22 / 23 November 2014

Power, baby, power. Doesn't it all come down to power—getting it, using it, wasting it, losing it? Power! Misusing or abusing it. Doesn't so much of our living come down to the quest for power—all the learning, and the laboring, and the dreaming, and the scheming? And yes, all this quaint and ancient imagery of sheep and kings. It's about the ages-old mystery of power. A king might be the only thing harder to find in the South Hills today than a sheep. And yet, kings are still a symbol of absolute power, and sheep still represent utter powerlessness. These visions in Matthew and Ezekiel, these are visions of power. Isn't much of our time devoted to the seeking, and the saving, and the hoarding, and the displaying of our power? Oh, the endless pursuit of power, how it disrupts our peace, lays waste to our planet, and troubles our hearts. If there is any moral dilemma that characterizes our times, it is a senseless lust for power. We'll steal for it; we'll deceive for it; we'll gerrymander our communities for it. We live in a time when the unbridled pursuit of power no longer shocks us. When will we learn that power will always betray those who run after it?

It happened early last spring that we found ourselves without power—my little family and me. I came home from work, and there was no electricity; the house was frigidly cold, and to top it all off, in a completely unrelated fluke (which seemed related to me at the time), my cell phone wouldn't work. I had to come back here to the church to call West Penn Power to let them know about the electricity problem. If you ever want to know what powerlessness feels like, spend twenty minutes wandering through the maze of recorded telephone messages at West Penn Power when your kids are wearing three layers of sweatshirts, your freezer is thawing, and your house is freezing and dark. There's never a human voice. You leave your complaint in a voicemail, and a robot voice makes vague promises about sending a service man out within seventy-two hours. It all turned out okay in the end. We used my wife's cranberry-scented candles to light the dark, blankets to survive the cold, and it turned out that my cell phone just needed to reboot—I'm just old enough to be constantly baffled by the maintenance needs of technological gadgets. It turned out alright because the crisis of power was temporary. It reminded me of the days long ago when the school bus used to drop my siblings and me off at the Coblentz Farm, where we would sit with three generations of an Amish family in a bare room dimly lit by kerosene lamps, heated by a wood-burning stove, nobody speaking, nobody so much as reading a book. Just sitting in the near dark with twelve Amish strangers in their unadorned house until our mother could get off work and take us home. At least the Coblentzes knew how to live without power. They purposely eschewed all power—both literal and figurative. They had no use for power, whether it was measured in watts or in nuclear warheads. They lived off the grid, and they never took their social or political opinions to the polls. They were powerless by choice. Ah, but for us who treat power as our due! Let me ask you this: Is it harder to live with your own powerlessness, or is it harder to live with a sense of entitlement toward power? Which is more harmful to the soul?

Power is potential, possibility. It means having options. Being powerless makes us feel desperate, but possessing power can make us rash, self-indulgent, wasteful. Truly, don't you think we're living in a dire crisis of power in our day—literal power, which is to say the endless, destructive quest for resources to support our sumptuous lifestyles, but

also figurative power—strong, reliable, trustworthy leadership that has the well-being of the masses at heart? How is it that we still don't understand power?

Aren't our illusions of power themselves the drug before which we are all of us powerless? Where in your life do you have the most power? Where are you freest to do as you choose—with total impunity? In what relationship, in what domain, in what field are you powerful? And where do you have the least power? In the face of what person, in the face of what circumstance, in the face of what substance are you utterly powerless? If only we could handle our power and our powerlessness alike with humility and good humor!

Well, today is lesser church holiday known as “Christ the King.” It's the last day of the church year before Advent begins, next week. I used to like the splendor of Christ the King Sunday...until I began to prefer the simple Jesus of Nazareth to the Enthroned Christ of the Stained Glass Windows. The problem with Christ the King Sunday is that it's an occasion of grandeur that I think would have embarrassed Jesus the Galilean to no end. Jesus saw the reign of God not in palaces and in temples but in lost sheep, lost coins, and mustard seeds, and the birds of the air. Also, Christ the King Sunday tends to bump up against Thanksgiving to create a strange Sunday morning mixture of pomp and gratitude. And in Matthew, this one and only Scriptural passage where Jesus seems to be calling himself a king—if indeed it is to himself that he's referring in the parable of this sheep and the goats—in this one and only passage where Jesus seems to be claiming any kind of earthly power for himself, even here he depicts himself nothing like the rulers of our world, but as a shepherd-king, one whose only interest is the welfare of all those helpless, hopeless, powerless sheep. Power is meant to be invested in the well-being of the world. For power will not be held or hoarded; we are merely its conduits. We cannot keep it but can only convey it.

Oh, I know, I know. Most of us haven't seen a sheep since the last time our sister-in-law threw a niece's birthday party at the petting zoo. My own children, who are only two generations removed from Old MacDonald (on their mother's side), wouldn't know a “ram” as anything but a Dodge truck. They think a “ewe” is nothing more than a personal pronoun. They think the word “kid” refers only to them and others like them. I've told you many a time that I stopped preaching the Scriptural passages about sheep ten years ago, when I had an actual sheep farmer in my church. I used to stand in the pulpit and make pronouncements about sheep and their ways, and that old sheep farmer would frown with disappointment and shake her head sadly with everything I said. It was as if she wanted to say, “Ah, sheep are so misunderstood! Even the preacher doesn't grasp the ways of the sheep!” But that was in the countryside around Meadville, up north, and I'm less likely to find real, live shepherds here in Mt. Lebanon. It might be safe for me to return to the Scriptural passages about sheep. Besides, they're a powerful metaphor for humanity. They're herd animals. They're creatures of habit. Their happiness is in the hands of their leaders. Sheep are a symbol of powerless people, and each of us has been a sheep at some point in our lives. If you're not a helpless sheep at the moment, well then remember that you once were, and you just might someday be one again. Each of us is a powerless sheep sooner or later...or sooner and later. The purpose of power is merely to protect and care for those who find themselves in their necessary sheep-phase, which lasts longer for some of us than for others. The power that so many seek for their own self-advancement, the power that they chase after, and attain, and maintain for a season,

the power that they use and abuse, that they all of them lose, in the end—that power's only purpose is to shelter and keep the sheep, which all of us are now and again. Vying for power, clinging to power will make us crazy.

Power will not be possessed, at least not for long. It waxes and wanes and moves between us like the tides. Use it wisely while it's in your hands; it won't be there forever. Use it kindly, and invest it not in your own illusions of safety and happiness but in the well-being of all those helpless sheep, for you yourself have been one of them...and perhaps you'll be one again. Surely, surely you will be one again!

Sheep probably have powers that we don't give them credit for. A very devout cowboy lost his favorite Bible while he was mending fences out on the back forty. He was distraught. He loved that Bible, and now that it was gone he was reduced to reading the New International Version. (Maybe that's only funny to pastors.) But he just couldn't think where he might have dropped it. About a week later, a sheep came walking up to him, carrying the lost Bible in its mouth. "It's a miracle," the devout cowboy declared, gazing heavenward. The sheep rolled its eyes and replied, "Not really. Your name is written inside the front cover." (Okay, you try to find a clean sheep joke on the Internet!) Sheep must certainly have some unseen abilities that would cause you and me to marvel. But on the whole, a sheep is a symbol of helplessness and need, a symbol for humanity at its weakest.

Yes, these words from the Gospel of Matthew are pretty familiar to us, the parable of the sheep and the goats being separated by their shepherd king. But I hope you noticed the reading from Ezekiel, too. Now, they tell you in seminary never to preach two texts at once, but this Ezekiel text only comes once every three years, and it's just too good to pass up. There are some strange and colorful characters in our sacred book, but Ezekiel is the strangest. Maybe you thought John the Baptist was curious, with his tangled beard and the bits of locust in his teeth. But John's a proper English schoolboy compared to the ranting priest of the Babylonian exile, Ezekiel. He's the wild man of Babylon who sees visions so bizarre that even those of us who spend most Sundays in the pews know next to nothing about his long, unwieldy book. The only passage from Ezekiel that most church folks know is "The Valley of the Dry Bones," and even that is due to an old and anatomically questionable children's song. ("The neck bone connected to the head bone"?) Zeke is the only prophet who ever claimed to see God. He was into symbolic acts, like lying on his side for more than a year and playing with Tonka toys to foretell the destruction of Jerusalem. And if old Zeke ever offers you a loaf of his homemade bread, do not eat it! Go to Google to find out why! The rest of his impassioned book is so filled with tears and madness that some scholars have wondered if Ezekiel didn't indulge in some kind of hallucinogenic substance.

And yet, here in the surrealistic pages of the Hebrew Bible's strangest book we find a poignant vision that speaks timeless truth to every great nation that has ever felt itself slipping into decline. (Hear, O Israel!) Let me say that again. Ezekiel the oddball spoke a truth to Jerusalem that he could just as easily have spoken to Athens, or Rome, or Babylon itself. It's a truth that Portugal and Spain didn't learn until it was too late, a truth that has caught Moscow on its horns more than once. Paris didn't learn Ezekiel's hard truth until a guillotine appeared in the Place de la Concorde. And that truth is very simply this: Whenever the rich and powerful of any nation cease to see the masses as their responsibility, to be protected and cared for, but instead see them as dumb sheep to

be fleeced and robbed, then that nation is bound to collapse under its own weight, and justly so. To Ezekiel, it is simply God's judgment. He saw his nation failing, and he attributed its decline to the “fat, strong sheep” who bullied the weak instead of caring for them. Israel fell into disgrace because its ruling class became reckless and decadent.

Ezekiel's vision is of a shepherd-king who will “be just” between us sheep, enacting justice between us, his sheep. And just between us sheep, if this is the fate that awaited every great nation before us, what about Washington? Are we to be history's one and only exception to Ezekiel's and Matthew's visions of the shepherd-king?

Ah, power! I truly don't know which is harder: to be one of the least of these, or to be one of the most of these; to be utterly powerless or to have power and not be ruined by it, to use it wisely and well. The kings of this world fail us because none of us knows how to handle our own power. If you think powerlessness makes you feel trapped and crazy, perhaps it's because you don't even notice how crazy your power is making you on a daily basis. The options, the choices, the possibilities of our day to day life are nearly endless. But power is transient; it passes. We have all been sheep at some point or another, and yes, we will certainly all of us end up as sheep once again. Just a band of sheep—equal before the throne of a shepherd-king.

All our earthly kings have failed us because they couldn't handle power; that's why we've had to replace them with more just systems. But when the spirit of those old kings creeps in again, even to our most egalitarian societies, when the spirit of greed, and gain, and the quest for power becomes the norm once again, what then? Oh, power! Do you remember that old Bob Dylan song that was so beautifully redone by Sarah Jarosz? “Ring them bells Sweet Martha for the poor man's son. Ring them bells so the world will know that God is one. Oh, the shepherd is asleep where the willows weep, and the mountains are filled with lost sheep.” Yes, the mountains of our world today are crawling with lost sheep. In fact, you might be one of them. The hills and the valleys of our nation are teeming again with powerless sheep; they stray amid the rocks and trees with no one to lead them safely to pasture. They've been fleeced and bullied by their so-called shepherds—their political and religious leaders—so that trust is in short supply.

It all comes down to power! Getting it, using it, keeping it, losing it. We are living in a dire crisis of power in our world today. Those who have it don't know how to use it, and those who don't have it want it. And yet, we've all been helpless sheep at one point or another, and we'll all be sheep again before it's through. Let me ask you again, where in your life do you have the most power?

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” You have all the power you need, my friends. Yours is the power to change the world. Amen.