

SERMON TITLE: "God's Message through Animals: The Sheep"  
SERMON TEXT: Ezekiel 34:11-31  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: July 17, 2022, at First UMC

### INTRODUCTION

I've told you before that I like the *Pickles* comic strip. Elderly Earl and Opal usually have some funny experiences going on. In an early June series, their grandson Nelson asked Grampa [sic] Earl to tell him what his favorite animal was. Instead of telling Nelson the truth, Grampa Earl told the impressionable boy that his favorite animal was the kumquat. Earl told his grandson that kumquats "live in trees," that "they're very quiet and gentle," and that—for tricks—they can "roll over." In the next day's comic strip, Nelson was talking with Gramma [sic] Opal, whose favorite animals are cats. When Nelson reported that Grampa's favorite animal was a kumquat, Opal's response was that "Grampa has a kumquat for a brain, bless his heart." Later, Nelson informed Earl, "Gramma took me to the grocery store and showed me a kumquat." Then, with one in his hand and his voice raised, Nelson insisted, "**This** is a kumquat, and it's **not** an animal. It's a **fruit!**" To that, Grampa Earl replied, "Did I say kumquat? My mistake. I meant to say that my favorite animal is the rutabaga." "Oh," said Nelson.<sup>1</sup>

During this month of July, we've been looking at scriptures that have something to do with animals and how God can speak to us through those creatures. On July 3rd, we heard about God's message to us through the eagle. Last Sunday, we talked about God's message to us through the fish. Remember? Take care of your health; some changes might be needed; and everything's better with Jesus. Next Sunday, Austin Barron and the United Methodist Men will be leading the service, and they'll do their own thing. But then, on July 31, we'll return to this animal series and learn about God's message through the donkey. Today, though, as we immerse ourselves in the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, let's listen for God's message through the sheep.

### **1—GOD SEEKS AND RESCUES THE LOST**

Fortunately, the bleating and baaing of the sheep is pretty clear. When we look at Ezekiel 34, verses 11-16, we see right away the first part of God’s message through the sheep: God seeks and rescues any who are scattered and lost. Just like a good shepherd, God will go wherever it takes to find those sheep who are missing from the flock. It doesn’t matter whether the sheep become lost due to stormy darkness or some other cause. As we read in verse 16, God will personally “seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak.”

If you aren’t real familiar with the Prophet Ezekiel and the 48 chapters of this Old Testament book, you may be more familiar with Jesus’ Parable of the Lost Sheep in the Gospel of Luke. That story compares God to a good shepherd who cares so much for each and every sheep that he is willing to leave behind the 99 sheep to search for and find the one sheep that is lost. Some of us react to that story in surprise. We wonder if God the shepherd was reckless to leave the 99. What if something bad happened to them? Wouldn’t that be worse than losing just one? But, because God is present everywhere simultaneously, God doesn’t actually abandon the 99 to risk and danger. Instead, the story is told this way to emphasize the importance of every single one, even those who stray away. God cares about them too. God will not be too busy with the main group to notice those individuals who are suffering from temptation and other trials of life. God is not too focused on the main flock to see those drifting away and in need of some help.

If we were to pick a theme song to go with this search and rescue aspect of God’s nature, it would be the old hymn that urges,

Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,  
snatch them in pity from sin and the grave,  
weep o’er the erring one, lift up the fallen,  
tell them of Jesus, the mighty to save.<sup>2</sup>

Those lyrics are descriptive of what God is wanting to do. God, the shepherd of the sheep, seeks and rescues the lost.

## **2—GOD JUDGES US FOR HOW WE TREAT ONE ANOTHER**

The second part of God's message to us through the sheep is that God judges us for how we treat one another. In verses 17-19, God says, "I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats." God's judgement is about how these animals behave around each other and how their behavior affects the others. In verse 18, God asks, "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down the rest of the pasture with your feet? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?" In verse 19, God explains and complains that such behaviors don't leave good pasture and clean water for the sheep who come next.

Ezekiel probably witnessed this sheep behavior himself. After the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, Ezekiel was among the Jews who were taken into exile. In fact, Ezekiel 1:1 indicates that the prophet "was among the exiles by the River Chebar" when he "saw visions of God." As the conquerors were force-marching their Jewish captives toward exile in Babylon, they probably had stopped to camp along the river. Possibly they had sheep with them there, as a source of food for the guards and their captives. Possibly Ezekiel was observing how those sheep who got to the pastureland and river first not only satisfied their needs, but also spoiled those resources for the sheep who came along behind.

This message through the sheep for us, then, is that we need to be respectful in how we treat one another. When we use resources, we shouldn't ruin them for others. When we visit national parks and the wonders of nature, we shouldn't leave litter and waste. We should stay on the trail and not trample the beauty around it. At home, we shouldn't use more water than our share, because that takes away from what others need. I read a couple days ago that, per capita, Americans create more greenhouse gas emissions than any other people on earth. When we do that, of course, we are increasing the rate and severity of climate change all over the world and disproportionately hurting those in poorer nations.

We Americans are competitive by nature. We like to be first in line to get whatever goodies are available. But the message here is that we need to think about how our eagerness to hurry and get the

best and the most and the cheapest very often pollutes and destroys what could have been and should have been resources for others. In verses 20-22, we hear God's judgement against those who push and butt away the weaker animals, causing them to be scattered and ravaged. Sometimes, at least, those who stray and get lost don't do that just because they are tempted and give in to evil. Sometimes they go away because the powerful ones in the flock use up all the material, social, and emotional resources and leave them no space to live and flourish. The choices we make and the way we live impacts other people. That's why God judges us for how we treat one another.

### **3—GOD CARES FOR US ALL**

The third part of this message through the sheep, then, is that God cares for us *all*. God's goal, God's vision, God's plan is that *all* the sheep and *all* the people would have what they need. As stated throughout these verses, it's God's intent and desire to provide a safe land with pure water and good pasture for the strays who are rescued and for the rest of the flock too. God wants to bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. If necessary, God will judge and punish the overly-indulgent and the powerful in order to bring about this equity of resources and justice for all. But, hopefully, the strong and healthy sheep will share willingly and partner joyfully with God in this redistribution of power and access, so God's vision can be realized. As Ezekiel stood along the banks of the Chebar River, this is the prophetic vision that came to him from God. This was God's message through the sheep.

This message should sound familiar to us because it's essentially the message that Jesus preached throughout the gospels. Wherever he went, Jesus was opening up doors of opportunity to those who were weak, oppressed, and outcast. Jesus healed the sick, multiplied the food, and made space for women and children. When necessary, Jesus spoke words of judgement against the Pharisees and others who abused their power to benefit themselves at the expense of others.

In Matthew 25, Jesus made this point by telling a parable about sheep and goats. The bad goats didn't do what they should have. But the good sheep were those who shared food with the hungry,

clothes with the naked, hospitality with the stranger, and visits with those who were sick and in prison. Those acts of equitable sharing and compassionate justice were the ways to participate in the kingdom of God, the good society, the healthy flock. Whether spoken by Jesus in the New Testament or Ezekiel and other prophets of the Old Testament, God’s message through the sheep is the same: God cares for us all.

### **CONCLUSION**

Some of you have noticed that we’ve often been singing hymns written by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. She’s a Presbyterian pastor in New York who has an amazing gift for writing new lyrics that fit with old, familiar tunes. Because we stream our worship service over Facebook, we have to follow strict copyright laws that limit which songs we can use. Fortunately for us, Carolyn Winfrey Gillette is very gracious to allow congregations to use her large repertoire of hymns. The first hymn we sang this morning—about dolphins and pets with paws and whiskers—was one that Carolyn wrote in 2003 for a blessing of the animals service.

She has another hymn that goes well with today’s message through the sheep. Hear these words:

God, you spoke your word through [prophets] long ago and far away.  
Still your call for love and justice speaks to people in our day:  
For we’ve trampled on the needy and brought heartbreak to the poor;  
Lord, our way of life is greedy—we are always wanting more.

Lord, renew us in a vision of the world you’re working toward.  
Guide your church to make decisions that acknowledge you as Lord.  
May we seek your ways of justice, care for earth, and gladly give;  
May the words you spoke through [prophets] guide the way we daily live.<sup>3</sup>

God our good shepherd seeks and rescues the lost, judges us for how we treat one another, and cares for us all. This is God’s message to us through the sheep.

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<sup>1</sup>By Brian Crane, June 2-4, 2022.

<sup>2</sup>By Fanny Crosby, 1869.

<sup>3</sup>“God, You Spoke Your Word through Amos,” c. 2010, as found at [www.carolynshymns.com](http://www.carolynshymns.com), with permission for use. I substituted [prophets] where Carolyn had “Amos.”